

Blessed Bea

***Letter from Vincent Burton, S.J., Jesuit Mission, Saint Mary's City, Maryland Colony
To Matthew Burton, S.J., Clermont University, Paris
Easter Sunday, March 22, 1668***

My Dearest Brother,

It is Easter and yet I feel no joy. How can I when it seems our Lord raised me up in hope only to let me fall? To the North, our Jesuit brothers write their brave stories in the red of martyrs' blood. Yet, here in Maryland, I scribble mine in the black ink of a petty clerk ... in ink that as soon as it dries, begins to fade. Still, I feel someone must read my story. So, with this letter, I send you my journals. Tomorrow they sail aboard the Gannet, in my place and the place of my little Bea.

It is late as I write this. And, though the night air in my room is cold, I smell the warmth of Spring upon it. It is the smell of things long buried beginning to turn and shift. I hope it is the same for me – that my soul is not dead but, like a corm in winter soil, only awaits the day when it can once again sprout and grown. I pray, in time, my spirit can break through this crust of sadness and doubt. But, for now, I will let it sleep. I am so very tired.

Your brother in blood and in Christ,

Vincent

Chapter 1

“We’ll never reach Mattapany in time if we don’t leave now. Where is Simon?” Vincent smoothed his dark hair and set his wide brimmed hat in place then looked down at the young tonsured man who was frantically shifting through a leather satchel filled with all the things the priest would need to perform mass and spend a night away from the rectory. The novice’s face still showed faint creases from his rumpled bedding and he squinted as he moved closer to the fire to better see what the bag contained.

“He’s gone to fetch your cloak, Father.”

“My cloak?” Vincent spun toward the open rectory door and his cassock lifted, showing the toes of a fine pair of riding boots. He raised an arm and gestured dramatically at the star-specked, pre-dawn sky. “Look at the sky, Brother Gregory. There isn’t a cloud to be seen. Why in blazes would I need a cloak?”

“Simon insists the weather will change, Father. He left us clear instructions to prepare the mission for a fierce storm.”

On the far side of the room, an old priest muttered and shook his head. His long white beard tangled in the enormous crucifix he wore over his stained cassock.

“You object, Father Matthias?” Vincent asked, his expression showing the folly in doing so. The older priest did not respond. Vincent continued in a less acidic tone. “I, for one, hope Simon’s prediction

is correct. I'd welcome a change from this suffocating heat and a storm could be enlivening. Three years I've been here, yet I've seen nothing of the *fierce* weather they'd told me to expect in America.

"Oh, here is your shaving blade. I knew I'd packed it." Brother Gregory held up the instrument and his round face lit with pride at its discovery.

"Still, it is good to be sure," Vincent said giving the youth a thankful nod. He stroked his chin absently then shook his head. "There isn't enough light to shave. I'll stop before we reach the Chancellor."

Shouldering the satchel Brother Gregory held out to him, Vincent stepped out the door and walked across the rectory garden. Stopping at the woven wattle gate, he called back, "Tell Simon I've started. If he thinks I need a cloak, he can carry it the ten miles to Mattapany."

Though he'd allowed himself to sound impatient with Simon's delay, Vincent welcomed the excuse to set out alone and suspected his servant had arranged the cloak-retrieving errand to allow it.

To the East, the darkness was beginning to grow thinner, the stars dimmer, but the fields and river were still a single smear of black. Only an occasional shimmer of movement on the water's surface set it apart from the marsh reeds. It was Vincent's favorite time of day, before the burdens of running a mission an ocean removed from the mother church yet in the midst of delicate politics could assert their hold on his mind. He'd been taught to seek God in all things but had long before come to the conclusion that it was unlikely God bothered to insert himself into the mundane matters of a Jesuit colonial administrator. And, it was only at moments like this, when the soft scrape of his boot soles on the sandy path set a rhythm that allowed him to think of nothing but the satisfaction of moving forward, that Vincent found he could set his daily worries aside. In his mind, the featureless, tidal land swelled and rose into hills, the heavy clay soil sprouted rocks and the cloying smell of mud was replaced by the refreshing tang of ocean air blown across heather. The little settlement clinging to the damp, slick edge of an uncharted continent fell away and he was once again walking on the familiar cliffs of Northumberland.

Simon appeared at the roadside a few miles on, but they walked in silence until the sun lit the landscape and, in so doing, dispelled the priest's imaginary visit to his homeland. "What's all this about a change in the weather?" Vincent asked turning to the Piscataway by his side.

"There is a storm coming," Simon said simply.

"We've had storms before."

"Yes, but this will not be like those."

Vincent looked about. The sky was lightly feathered with thin white bands of cloud and the river, often frothy with waves the ocean tides pushed up the Chesapeake Bay, was flat and glassy, "How will it be different?"

"This afternoon, a hot wind will sweep over us. Then, during the night, the rain will begin. First, it will only be a light rain, but by the time we return to St. Mary's it will be very heavy and will come with a new, very strong wind." Simon raised his arm over which was draped the priest's cloak. "Like a hand in a basin of water, that wind will push the ocean up the Bay and the Bay up its rivers. Much of our mission and the village will be under saltwater. After a day, the tide will ease back and everyone will rush about, setting things in order."

"We shouldn't set thing in order though, I take it," Vincent said with a chuckle at the Piscataway's dry condescension for his white *guardians*.

"No, we should not. As soon as we have, the giant hand will sweep back down the rivers, this time flooding us with sweet water. In a storm of this size the saltwater brings destruction, but the sweet water rinses the destruction away and brings new life. If you ae properly prepared, it can be a blessing."

Vincent looked again at the river. A heron was laboriously flapping its wings to lift its body above the water. But for this movement, the scene was utterly still. Not even a breeze ruffled the reeds or the leaves of the big beech trees lining the riverbank like a hall of marble statues of scholars and

philosophers. Still, the priest did not doubt Simon's prediction. "And, we shall be properly prepared, thanks to you," he said as he thought again how lucky they were to have such a man in the mission. Father Matthias often railed against Simon, insisting he retained too much of his native ways, but Vincent Burton did not agree. To him, it did not seem necessary to change a good man's heart or insist that he give up his knowledge to deliver his soul.

##

Thomas Meade released his hold on the axe handle and ran his hands over the thighs of his breeches leaving dark smears of sweat on the faded linen. Grasping the axe again, he pulled to loosen the blade from the tree trunk. When it came free, he leaned forward and inspected his work. A band as wide as his palm and as deep as the axe blade could bite encircled the big poplar's base, exposing pulpy flesh oozing sap. Above, the tree's broad leaves rustled in a gust and sunshine flickered through the canopy painting spots of gold across the ground. Thomas smiled imagining how the leaves would wilt and fall allowing the flickers of light to grow larger until the only shade left was that cast by the dead tree's skeleton of limbs.

Hoisting his axe to his shoulder, he walked toward a tree that had been similarly girdled some time before. It stood bare, its shriveled leaves littering the ground. Malcolm's axe set a steady beat and he did not pause or slow as Thomas swung his own axe in an alternate rhythm. Chips flew and the sharp smell of oak filled the air as the two men worked in silence.

"That'll do, Malcolm," Thomas said, setting his axe on the ground and pressing his hands into the small of his back.

Malcolm scooped loose bits of wood from the hole they'd hacked into the tree's trunk. "Still a bit wet, but I think it will burn," he said as he arranged dry leaves and smaller branches in the hole then stepped back so Thomas could strike a spark with his flint.

When a fire was smoldering within the dead tree's base, Thomas added a few lumps of the charcoal that he carried in his pocket then brushed the soot from his hands. "That will see us until dark. I'll come back after supper and add enough to burn through the night." Another gust of wind lifted the russet curls from his forehead and flattened his short, thick beard against his cheeks. The dead leaves rose and spun in a whirlwind around he and Malcolm's knees then settled again on the ground. Shading his hazel eyes, Thomas looked up at the sky. "Something is coming. Something unlike anything we've seen in the years we've been here. I'll be damned if it's not."

Looking at his companion, Thomas saw that Malcolm's dark face had taken on a sharper look than usual; the dark eyes squinting; the thin lips tight over his small, pointed teeth. Thomas wondered if Malcolm's look was one of interest or disapproval. Sadly, he decided it was likely the latter. The young man and his sister had been with the Meades since they were children and Thomas had come to think of them more as kin than as servants. Still, he had to admit a change had come over Malcolm; a change that made Thomas long for the closeness they'd once shared. Dropping his massive arm across the smaller man's shoulders, he gave Malcolm a friendly shake. "Or, then again, nothing is coming and I'm a silly ass. I can no more read this land than I can Latin."

"Oh, I think ye can read this land as well as any," Malcolm said with a stiff smile. Retrieving their tools, the two men began to climb the slope to the path.

Though Thomas Meade had never spoken of leaving England before throwing his lot in with the Calvert venture in Maryland, no one who knew him had been surprised by his decision to do so. The son of a long line of artisans, Thomas had early shown a disdain for shop work and a love for the soil more likely in a peasant farmer. His friends had often teased that he dreamed of hills and valleys the way they did of women. It had seemed only natural that a man with Thomas' lust for land would wish to live where virgin soil could be had by anyone willing to spill his sweat upon it. Unlike others who had responded to the Calvert's call for settlers, however, Thomas Meade had come with coin in his pocket and a plan in his mind. And, with good sense and iron determination, he'd pieced together a sizable holding

form the hilly and heavily woods lots that still remained after the colony's founders and financiers and the Catholic Church had cut out their own estates.

At the hill's crest, Thomas and Malcolm turned onto the narrow path leading past the Catholic mission and on to the Meade home. "Have you selected a lot yet from among those I'm offering?" Thomas asked.

Malcolm shook his head but said nothing. Thomas gave him a long sideways look.

"There should be no question. The lot adjacent to the mission is clearly the best. It's hilly but largely free of trees and the creek would allow you to float your tobacco to port instead of having to roll it and risk having it turned to powder."

Malcolm still offered no reply and Thomas shook his head in frustration.

"If I had any sense, I'd just let you pass the lot up and keep it for my own use. Look, look at it!" he said pointing down the path to the tract in question. "It's one of the best unfarmed parcels left in St. Mary's and I'm offering to transfer it to you for a pittance. I didn't raise you to be a fool so I'm sure you learned it from those crows – Tulliver and his scripture brigade. Come to this fine land and spend all their time in a meeting house studying the words of a few desert shepherds who'd have fallen on their knees and worshipped a golden calf at the sight of such fertile soil."

Thomas kicked a stone into the high grass as he walked but then turned when he realized Malcolm no longer followed him.

The young man's olive skin had turned a deep crimson and his voice was thin with the strain of not shouting in his anger. "Ye and Joan have been verra good to me and m' sister. Ye gave us a home in England; brought us here where we have the chance to be much more than we ever could have been there. I have listened to everything ye have told me, never spoken against ye." Malcolm stopped speaking. Thinking he was done, Thomas stepped forward to offer some apology, but Malcolm threw his arms out,

making Thomas step back in surprise. “No, Thomas Meade,” he hissed. “I may be indebted, but I’m no longer bonded to ye. Ye canna tell me what to think and I’ll no have ye mocking me or those whose guidance I seek for putting our morals ahead of our purses. Ye may na care about the shame the Catholics and their natives bring on us all, but I do. And, best land or no, I’ll no raise a family across a fence from them. As for Edward Tulliver, the Reverend is the only man I know who can match Thomas Meade in a day’s work and perhaps beat him in a wrestling match the evening after. So, ye’d best no be calling names.” Malcolm pressed by Thomas on the path. He did not turn to look at the land Thomas had offered him, and his gaze dropped to the ground as he approached the mission gate and fields.

When Malcolm had turned a corner in the path, Thomas set off slowly, still stunned by the young man’s show of temper. From the time Malcolm and his sister, Claire, had joined the Meade’s household as orphans, the boy had been Thomas’ closest companion. Always of a serious nature that belied his youth, Malcolm had become Thomas’ confidant long before they’d set sail for Maryland. Bit by bit, however, the younger man had been drawn to the community of Puritans who had lately crossed the river from Virginia. Thomas had thought it a simple matter. Malcolm was smitten with a daughter of the Puritan preacher, Edward Tulliver, and it was natural he’d adopt some of their manners in order to appeal to her. Now, however, Thomas saw that the thorn lay deeper and he resolved to see it dislodged.

Several of the Piscataway men were picking immature ears from the late-planted corn. At their feet, children were plucking bean pods from the vines that grew up the cornstalks. Thomas stopped and watched as the natives worked quickly, moving from one row to the next, bringing in the harvest before it was fully ripened. Squinting into the afternoon sun, Thomas looked for a cassocked form among the workers and finally saw the youngest of the three Jesuits, Brother Gregory, weaving between the men, emptying their baskets into a large sack.

“It’s a bit early for harvesting,” the big planter called, cupping his hands around his mouth so his deep voice would carry.

Brother Gregory set down the sack and, hitching his cassock in his hands, jogged over. “Yes, Master Meade. It is, but we’re preparing for the storm.”

Thomas looked up at the nearly cloudless sky. “So, you feel something too?”

“Oh, not me,” Gregory said shaking his head. “Simon. He’s gone to Mattapany with Father Vincent but advised us to bring in all we could. He seems quite sure that there is a terrible storm coming. And, though it may seem fair weather now, I doubt he is mistaken.”

“No, I don’t imagine he is,” Thomas said with a nod. “I’m glad we spoke. I haven’t time to bring in my own corn, but I will see that my tobacco is secure. Thank you.” Brother Gregory smiled, then trotted back into the field and resumed his work.

Thomas set off, his pace quickened, his concerns for Malcolm forgotten.

##

***Journal of Vincent Burton, S.J., Jesuit Mission, Saint Mary’s City, Maryland Colony
September 7, 1667 – Marymas, the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary***

It has come just as Simon said it would. Yesterday afternoon, the air turned thick and hot. There was an irregular wind that reminded me of the panting of an exhausted animal – wet, malodorous, and stifling. In the night, the rain began. Returning to the mission this noontime, we found everyone engaged in the tasks Simon had assigned them. The children had been set to gathering loose things and placing those needed where the wind and tide could not use them to make mischief. The canoes had been drawn far up the slope from the river’s bank and weighed down with large stones, the tobacco casks rolled to higher ground yet and covered.

Though Brother Gregory was at work with the others, I found Father Matthias standing by useless and angrier than usual. When I asked why he was so ill-tempered, he pronounced that weather is God’s will and to try to predict it is either conceit or superstition. I asked which Noah was – conceited or

superstitious and he raged that equating Simon's predictions to Noah's divine communications from God was blasphemy. It did not please him when I told him that I'd seen the peasants from his native Normandy taste the dirt to see if it was fit for planting and then rush to the church to light candles in case their tongues had failed them. I should forget these petty quarrels Matthias and I have with such regularity, yet I feel compelled to record them so perhaps others can see how daily I am challenged by those meant to assist me in my ministry and, shamefully, how I continue to fail to have the patience to meet that challenge unaffected. Why Father Matthias was assigned this mission remains a mystery to me. His disdain for me as his superior, for the English Catholics as his flock, and – above all – for the Piscataway as the souls he is meant to save, seems bottomless. Not taking a cane to him is daily a test of my restraint. In truth, all this seems some perverse test – ambivalent Catholics, hateful Puritans, beaten and weary Piscataway – they must all be tools of some lesson I must learn before I'm finally allowed to pursue my true mission. I see no other explanation for being here when I am so much more profoundly needed at home in England as the Catholic church struggles to regain some strength there.

##

Vincent set down his quill and pressed the heels of his hands into his eye sockets until small sparks seemed to dance in the dark corners of the room. A gust of wind slammed hard against the side of the rectory. There was a sharp whistle as it licked at the roof and walls, looking for loose shingles to pull free and hurl into the darkness. By Vincent's side, Brother Gregory looked up at the beams expectantly. When the wind subsided, he began to pace.

“Brother, if *you* insist on keeping vigil, *I* insist you do it kneeling.”

The young Jesuit gave an embarrassed smile then dropped to his knees in a corner and began nervously fingering the rosary he carried in his pocket.

Simon entered carrying a tray with a decanter of wine and three glasses. He set the tray on the table by Vincent's journal then stepped back toward the pantry.

“You’ve brought three glasses, but Father Matthias is fast asleep. Why don’t you join Gregory and I in a drink? Vincent tilted back his chair and balanced for a moment on its rear legs. Leaning forward to grasp the decanter, he let the chair fall forward then smiled as Father Matthias grumbled in his sleep at the resulting thud.

Simon nodded and passed the first glass Vincent filled to Brother Gregory, who’d risen from his knees, then accepted the next. There was a sharp crack and the crashing of branches just outside the door. Brother Gregory crossed himself then threw back the drink in a single swallow. On the far side of the room, the stays of Father Matthias’s cot creaked as he burrowed deeper into his blankets.

“How much longer?” Vincent asked sipping from his glass then sighing with pleasure as the sweet wine coated his tongue and throat.

“It will stop shortly, but only for a time. Then, it will strike again from the other side.” Simon held his glass up in one hand and, drawing circles in the air with the other, showed how they would pass through the storm’s eye only to be buffeted by its far side. As if on cue, the wind began to abate and the near deafening clatter of rain on the roof and shuttered windows lessened. By the time Vincent had finished a second glass of wine, the rain had nearly stopped.

“Shall we go out and see the damage?” Vincent asked. Standing, he stamped his feet into boots and tucked the hem of his shirt into the waist of his breeches. Brother Gregory jumped to his feet and opened the rectory door.

Overhead, a few stars could be seen, but they were quickly swallowed by the advance guard of a second, impenetrable wall of clouds rolling in from the east. Simon walked barefoot through the water pooled in the garden and returned a moment later with a ladder and hammer. Resting the ladder against the side of the rectory, he climbed quickly to the roof and secured the shingles the wind had loosened. Brother Gregory hitched his cassock between his thighs like a loincloth and, holding it at his groin, ran toward the orchard he’d planted along the gentle slope to the river.

Vincent laughed at the sight of the young man waddling, his sandals slapping the standing water so it splashed up around him. He turned to the east and rubbed his hands in anticipation of the oncoming tempest. Where the rising sun should have been, there was only a dark bank of angry clouds.

##

***Journal of Vincent Burton, S.J., Jesuit Mission, Saint Mary's City, Maryland Colony
September 9, 1667 – Feast of Saint Keiran, First Apostle of Ireland***

The tide has withdrawn, the storm has passed, though the damage it has wrought is considerable and the rain continues. Minding Simon's advice, we've made few repairs and are awaiting the downriver flood he has predicted. Gregory and I left Father Matthias to his grumbling as we traveled around the village to offer what service and solace we could. I'd hoped Matthias would be humbled to see everything Simon predicted come to pass. Instead, he seems angrier than ever, as if the Piscataway's predictions somehow brought on the destruction that lies around us. And, destruction there is. It seems no family has been left untouched. For most it is simply the disappearance of livestock or the destruction of crops. But, for others, the loss is far greater.

##

Thomas stood in the garden, hands pressed to his ears. Still, his wife's wails rang in his head; each one growing longer, the time between them shorter until they melded into a single exhalation of sorrow. He felt his own sadness swell in his chest until he thought his ribs might crack from the pressure. Barely suppressed sobs clawed at his throat, desperate to join those of his wife.

Malcolm stepped out the door, his face ashen. He held Jamie's hand in his. Thomas swiped the tears from his cheeks and, squatting, he opened his arms. The boy fell into them, nestling his head in the crook of his father's neck. He trembled, but made no sound and Thomas closed his eyes and held him tight.

“She’s frightening the poor lad.” Malcolm paused then added in a whisper, “I am afraid too. Claire tried to help wash and dress the body, but Joan would no let her near. She’s brought Betty to yer bed and is rocking her as if she means to put her to sleep.”

Thomas looked up in horror. Malcolm opened his mouth to speak but was silenced by another wail from within the house. When it stopped, he quickly said, “I think we must find someone to help her. I’m going to ask Reverend Tulliver to come. He’ll know what to do. What to say to comfort Joan.”

Shaking his head, Thomas said, “No. You’ll not bring that man or any of the others from that set in my house. They’ll have Joan believing Betty’s death is punishment for some misdeed.

Malcolm stiffened. “Reverend Tulliver is too kind to say such a thing at a time like this. But, perhaps *ye* should consider why yet another tragedy has befallen this house.”

Thomas rose to his feet. He still held Jamie cradled against his shoulder, but, striking with alarming speed, he clutched Malcolm’s shirt with the other hand.

“I should squeeze the breath from you for saying that,” he whispered. His grip tightened until Malcolm’s collar bit into the flesh of his neck. “You know as well as I, if the loss of a loved one were a sign of evildoing, everyone in Maryland would be doomed to hell twice over.” He released Malcolm’s shirt and handed him the child, whose breaths came slow and heavy with sleep. “Take him to sleep in the barn with you. *I’ll* get help for Joan.”

Thomas walked through the garden gate. He stopped at the top of the path and looked back at his home. With the storm cleared, the evening sky was painted in the vivid colors of gems – ruby, amethyst, sapphire – as the sun sank into the river. The wet leaves of the oak that grew by the house shimmered and smoke rose from the chimney in a dove-gray plume; beside it, a single limb thrust from the roof. Thomas drew a deep breath and turned toward the Catholic mission.

##

The three Jesuits had just sat at the table and Brother Gregory was leading them in a blessing when a knock silenced him. Simon rose from the hearth and opened the door. By the faint firelight, Vincent saw their visitor was a large man with a face likely carved oak. He struggled to identify the massive man who bent to duck under the rectory lintel. Gregory leaned toward him and whispered, “Thomas Meade, owns the track of woodland to our south.” Vincent smiled his appreciation then rose to greet his guest.

“Master Meade, welcome.”

“I’m sorry to disturb your supper, but I beg you to come speak to my wife. There’s no Anglican minister near and I’m afraid she’s in need of consolation I cannot give her.” The words rushed from Thomas Meade’s mouth in a torrent and Vincent heard him draw a deep breath and release it shakily.

“Of course, I’ll come. What is it? What has happened?” Vincent spread his arms as Gregory rushed forward with his cassock. The heavy woolen garment slipped over the priest’s thin linen shirt with a dry whisper and he turned his back to Meade to allow Gregory to belt it on his hip.

“It’s our little girl, Betty. She was killed in the storm.”

Vincent looked up at his guest, who stood at the center of the small room dwarfing its spare furnishings with his bulk. Tracks of tears glistened on the planter’s cheeks disappearing into his thick, close-cropped beard.

“After the storm had passed, I sent the children and servants up to the beds in the loft. A single tree shades our house, an old oak. The wind must have strained its limbs and the leaves would have been heavy with rain. As we slept, one limb broke from the tree and came through our roof. It crushed our little Betty. Claire, the servant girl who shares Betty’s bed was untouched.”

“I’m so sorry, Master Meade,” Vincent said, unable to think what else would suffice. He was thankful that Thomas Meade seemed not to hear his feeble attempt at a condolence.

“We lost the other lass, Maggie, to fever a year ago. They were both such sweet things, so cheery.” The big farmer threw back his head and looked up at the ceiling. “A home without girls will be like a garden without blossoms,” he said in a choked whisper. Meade made no further sound, but the effort demanded by that silence was painful to witness. His hands were locked in fists at his sides and his arms and neck showed thick chords of muscle and veins like twining ivy.

“Come, let us go quickly to your wife,” Vincent said, steering his visitor through the door and shutting it firmly behind them.

They walked in silence toward the Meade home and Vincent desperately searched his mind for words that would bring some comfort. Finding none, he instead reached in his traveling satchel, which Brother Gregory had handed him though there’d be no sacraments offered in the Meade’s Anglican household. He drew out a bottle of wine and passed it to Thomas.

Raising the bottle to his lips, Thomas drank deeply then gave an appreciative grunt. “If your Catholic consecration does this to wine, I must consider converting.”

“Not to worry, that is simply wine – not the blood of Christ – though close relations between the Pope and the King of Spain make it an exceptionally fine vintage.” Vincent looked at his companion, thankful to the planter for finding something to ease the awkwardness between them when he, the one meant to comfort, had not been able to do so. During his early years as a novice, Vincent had worked in a hospital, surrounded by death. Then, he’d learned the language of bereavement. Years as a colonial administrator and diplomat, however, had stifled his ability to speak from the heart and he felt shamefully unskilled at offering solace, particularly to one like Thomas Meade, who seemed more a force of nature than an ordinary man.

Thomas handed back the bottle, much lighter for his drinking. “My wife is a good woman, but she has not fared well here,” he said, staring into the darkness. “The loss of children is very hard on her. Margaret’s passing last year saddened her deeply. I fear Betty’s death will undo her.” He sighed then

continued with a shake of his head. “It is different for a man. Though we may never consider setting a wife aside for a younger woman, we always believe we will be able to father children until the day death takes us. When a child dies, we mourn the individual, but not the loss of fatherhood. But, with the same child’s passing, a piece of the mother is lost. It’s as though the little creature takes a handful of her mother’s heart with her to the grave for comfort.”

“You have children left?” Vincent asked, looking more closely at the much larger man by his side. He now saw the crease of wrinkles around Meade’s eyes, the strands of white mixed in his beard and realized that Meade was well into his forties. Still, he was clearly a man in his prime. Already a head taller than most, he appeared all the larger for the wildly curled coppery hair that crowned him like the autumn leaves of an oak. He walked with his wide shoulders back, his chest out and his arms nearly still by his sides, as though his thick legs did not need the swing of arms to help move him forward.

“Aye. We came six years ago with two children born and one in his mother’s belly. With this ... now... we have just the one, Jamie. He’s a fine, healthy lad. This place does not truly welcome strangers, but those born here seem to flourish.”

“So it seems, so it seems,” Vincent said, surprised to find that his experience confirmed what Meade said, though he’d never considered the fact. “You’re young yet, Mr. Meade. You’ll have more children.”

“No, Father, we will not. For the first years we were here, my wife was often sick with fever and lost several children before they were born. It seems to have brought her bearing time to an early end.” Vincent saw Meade look at the ground for a quick moment, an expression of discomfort on his face. But then, he shrugged and added, “Perhaps I shouldn’t speak so freely of these matters with a priest. I’m not sure what is proper.”

“I may be a priest, but I also oversee a sizable land holding. Husbandry is no mystery to me.” Vincent paused. He did not wish to overstep his bounds. Thomas Meade had not come in search of a

lecture on God's will. Still, he felt compelled to speak. "God's plan, now *that* is a mystery, even to me. But I *do* believe that everything happens for a reason. You must have faith that this is true. It may be hard for you to hear now, but I believe your girls perished to make room for something other. We must make your wife understand that her hardship has a purpose, though we cannot yet see what that purpose may be."

"Aye, Father, talk of purpose is good for some, but my Joan is not in a purposeful mindset just yet. I think a bit of the puffery for which you Papists are renowned would serve her better tonight." Vincent stopped mid-stride, again surprised by his companion's gift for humor in the midst of sorrow. *Was he trying to mask his pain or was this a man who truly loved life so deeply that he found little things to buoy him even in his darkest moments? What a gift that would be,* Vincent thought.

The big planter took a step on but then halted and turned toward the priest. Seeing the look of concern in his eyes, Vincent realized that Thomas Meade thought he'd offended him. Vincent quickly clasped the larger man's arm. "Yes, yes, of course. I'll speak to her of the joys of heaven and the little angels that the Lord sits on his knee, if that is the salve that will soothe her wounds. But, what can I say to comfort you?"

"Words mean little to me. I have my land, my work." The big farmer threw his arms wide and Vincent thought he saw a small glimmer of pride in the man's red, tear-swollen eyes. "Hard work may not heal me, but it will number me until time does." With these words, Thomas opened the gate to his garden and they approached the Meade's wooden house.

But for the single broken tree limb jutting from the roof like a knife from a loaf, there was no sign that a fierce storm had ripped across the land – no broken fence, no scattered debris, nothing on the house out of place. The twilight scene chilled Vincent. It seemed eerily deliberate; as though the tree limb had been inserted into the roof just so; to accomplish its task – the taking of a child's life.

##

The river was a churning ribbon of clay. It moved quickly yet appeared sluggish for its heavy load of soil. At its center, giant trees pirouetted as they tumbled toward the Chesapeake. Thomas walked the bank, a large stick in his hand. Occasionally, he'd stop to poke at the debris and Jamie would hover at his side, observing these investigations with the unique intensity of a five-year-old.

Joan had clung to the boy, sure that if she let him go, he too would be snatched away. But, Thomas had insisted. One-by-one, he'd peeled his wife's fingers from Jamie's arm then laid her hands flat across the tops of her thighs. As the door had shut behind them, Joan had begun to keen, releasing the sorrow she'd held tight since the wet soil had been heaped on the small box holding Betty. Thomas knew how hard Joan had fought to contain her grief. He'd insisted on taking Jamie as much for her sake as for the boy's. They needed time apart – the boy to live, the mother to mourn. Watching Jamie running ahead, his sadness and loneliness put aside for a moment in the excitement of exploring the storm-altered landscape, Thomas knew he'd been wise to do so.

"Come back. That bank has been undercut by the flood," he yelled to Jamie who hovered at the turbulent water's edge.

Jamie stepped back, but soon was inching again toward the river's edge. Thomas clasped the boy's his arm, making him jump in surprise.

"There's something moving among those branches," Jamie said, trying to squirm free so he could point at a dam of flotsam caught on some submerged rocks a short distance from the river's edge.

"Likely some animal caught up in the flood and battered by the debris. Come. It's nearly dark and your mother will have supper ready."

"We can't just leave it to drown!" Jamie said shaking his head, his eyes large with disbelief.

"But die it will, either on its own or by my hand and I'm no mood for a mercy killing."

"Please, Papa. Can't we just see what it is?"

Thomas stood silent, staring at his son. Papa had been the girls' name for him and not dignified enough for Jamie, who thought himself very much a man. Hearing the fond name now, with no daughters to speak it, cut Thomas deeply. Squatting, he clasped the boy to his chest to feel his breathing and warmth. Jamie fought to be loose and Thomas released him with a sigh. "Yes. Fine. I'll see what I can do. You stay here. Don't stand near the edge."

Thomas dropped down into the thigh deep water then waded toward the pile of debris that lay about ten yards into the river. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw Jamie lying on his belly in the wet grass and silt, anxious to see, but not wanting to disobey his father's command not to stand near the bank's edge. Shaking his head, Thomas said nothing. The child's muddy clothes might prove a good distraction for Joan, something to fuss about on their return to the house.

A log bobbed on the river's surface a way upstream and Thomas stopped. Relieved by the prospect of seeing his mission eliminated if the log hit the snag of limbs and swept its unfortunate occupant downstream. He looked again at the tangle of debris to be sure it lay in the log's path and only then saw the long, black hair waving like tendrils of seaweed among the tangled branches. A small hand rose from the flotsam, fingers spread wide against the sharp blue sky.

"Christ Almighty! It's a child!" Thomas shouted as he surged through the churning river, now desperate to reach the jam before it was struck by the log. His fingers grasped the first of the branches and began to tear at them though he could not see which held the small form captive. The log hit the jumble of snagged debris and, with a shudder, the tangled branches released their hold on each other. Thomas saw the child swept under by the current. He dove beneath the water's surface and waved his arms about desperately in the dark water until his fingers grazed skin. Clutching the child, he surfaced with a gasp and pulled the limp creature to his chest, above the water. "Jamie, run home," Thomas shouted. "Tell them I've found a child in the river."

Jamie jumped to his feet and ran toward their cottage. Thomas, sure the body in his arms was dead, watched his boy running along the bank and his heart clenched with love when he saw that Jamie, desperate to know what sort of figure he cut on such an important mission, ran with his head turned so he could watch his shadow pass over the ground.

Only when the boy was safely past the river's edge, did Thomas look at the young girl he held in his arms. "You poor thing, what has this storm done to you?" he murmured as he began to wade to shore. Suddenly, the child drew a labored breath. Thomas, startled by the sign of life, scrambled up the bank and to his feet. In the distance, he heard the family dogs barking as Jamie crashed into the garden, his shouts made incoherent by breathlessness and excitement. Walking quickly, Thomas followed, the trembling child held to his own soaked chest.

Malcolm met him in the orchard. "It is true, what the lad says. Ye have found a child," he said craning his head to see the child's face. "An Indian," Malcolm said under his breath as he stepped back quickly.

Thomas nodded and continued toward the house.

Joan, red-eyed, her face puffy with crying, stood in the doorway. Jamie, now frightened by the adults' anxiety, clung to his mother's side, one hand wrapped in the cloth of her skirt. Joan dropped to her knees and wrapped her arms around her son then sobbed over the boy's head to her husband, "I can't. I can't watch another child die. Please don't bring her to me."

"Well, she'll die for sure if we don't tend her and I can't very well put her in the barn like some motherless calf." Thomas walked forward with the girl then squatted at the doorstep in front of his wife. Joan scuttled back like a crab, unwilling to look at the form lying in her husband's arms.

"Mama? Can't you help her?" Jamie asked in a whisper that communicated his dismay in seeing his mother's fear of this helpless child. Joan reluctantly gave a nod. Her gaze did not leave Thomas's face, but her hands felt the child's bare chest for breathing, her river slick limbs for broken bones, her

head for fever. Finally, she looked at the child's face and tears came to her eyes. She raised a hand, muddled from touching the child, to her mouth. "She's so like Betty."

Thomas looked down and saw nothing similar between the strange, naked child in his arms and the daughter he'd just buried. Betty had been a stout child with pale skin and curly, ginger hair. Her round face had been creased by dimples, her snub nosed sprinkled with freckles they made of game of counting each night. The child in his arms was thin and lean, her arms and legs already gracefully long and muscled. Her skin was pale and wrinkled from its soaking, but it still had a rich glow like well-polished cedar and her hair was thick, straight, and very dark with an indigo tint, like the swallow's that dipped over the river in the evening. Her forehead and cheekbones were broad, her nose and chin tapered to sharp ends. In fact, the only thing this child seemed to share with Betty was an age, which Thomas judged to be about eight.

He and Joan stood and he followed her into the house. He set the child on a pallet Claire had pulled near the fire. Water was steaming in a kettle and Joan poured some in a basin and, dipping a cloth, began swabbing the child's face.

"She must have been horribly tangled in those branches as they floated down the river to that snag. They've torn at her terribly. She has wounds on her hands and feet," Thomas said. "But the worst is across her ribcage on her left side. You'll want to clean it."

Committed now to her task, Joan wiped at the pale blood trickling down the child's side. "This won't do. There's so much silt clinging to her skin. I can't possibly wipe it all away. Claire, bring me the laundry tub and put more water on the fire. We'll have to bathe her. It will warm her. Look, the poor thing is shivering. Oh, she has been terribly beaten, hasn't she?"

"She's lucky to be alive. The river is filled with tree limbs large enough to sink a ship let alone kill a small child." Thomas shuddered as soon as he'd uttered the words and both he and Joan looked up

to the rafters to the patching he and Malcolm had finished just before he took Jamie for the walk along the river's edge.

When the water was warmed, Thomas, still in his dripping shirt, rolled up his sleeves and held the little girl over the tub as Joan poured the water over her. A cloud of steam enveloped them and, as the warmth penetrated the child's stupor, her eyelids fluttered. Slowly, the child's gaze rose to Thomas' face and he saw that her eyes were not the dark brown he'd expected, but a deep blue, like the morning glories that draped their garden fence. Unsure what to say, he only murmured, "No need for fear, no need for fear. We mean to help you."

The water was brown and filmed with bits of leaf and pine needles by the time the child's bath was complete. Thomas removed his own wet shirt then held the child again to his chest as Joan dressed her wounds then arranged blankets on the pallet. Now that she was awake, the girl's body had a wholly different feel to it – no longer loose-jointed and fluid, but solid, real. When the bed was arranged, Thomas squatted and set the child upon it. "First light, I'll fetch the priest."

He saw Joan's hands stop their work tucking the child's coverings and realized she thought he meant to have the child given final rites. Suddenly overcome with fatigue, he pressed his knuckles into the floor and pushed up to his feet. He took hold of Joan's elbow and pulled her up too then pressed her to his side and whispered in her ear, "No, Joan. I only want the priests because they speak the local tongue. I'm sure she knows no English." Shivering with the chill of being damp and shirtless, he released Joan and walked to the pegs where his spare clothing hung.

Jamie, forgotten in the commotion, quietly approached the pallet and, leaning toward the girl, said softly, "I was the one who first saw you all twisted in those tree branches." The girl smiled at him faintly then closed her eyes.

Jamie ran to Thomas' side and began tugging at his hand. "Did you see that? She smiled at me. She understood what I said."

Thomas was ready to tell his son it couldn't be so, but seeing the joy in the boy's face, he did not. Pulling a dry shirt from the peg where it hung by the fire, he only said, "Aye, son, she understood your kindness." But to his surprise, Thomas found he did believe it was possible that the girl had understood his son's words. Somehow, finding the small creature clinging to life in the midst of nature's fury had left Thomas Meade feeling that, indeed, anything was possible.

Chapter 2

*Journal of Vincent Burton, S.J., Sant Mary's City, Maryland Colony
September 10 – Feast of Saint Bega, the Virgin of Northumberland*

Saint Bea, flower of Northumberland, today more than any other, I long for the land of my childhood, a land you came to for refuge and blessed with your pure presence. I cannot help but believe that my true mission lies there, among my people, among your adopted people. What use am I here, where the natives slowly withdraw as we push our plows and our ways further up their rivers? Those who remain shame me with their simple piety when, all around them, we English grasp and clutch. Catholics grow few and those who remain bar me from public displays of faith for fear I will offend their neighbors. In this land granted to the Catholics for freedom of practice, they worry that my efforts to build a proper church are too brazen. In England, King Charles and his Catholic queen drive out the Puritans, but where do these Puritans go with their hateful doctrines? Here, where gagged and tethered, I wait. But, wait for what; for whom?

##

It was still dark when Thomas set out for the mission. He arrived to find the Jesuits and Piscataway gathered below a large wooden cross suspended from the branches of an old beech. Father Vincent stood by a table draped with an embroidered cloth, his back to the congregation. The priest's eyes were closed, and the rising sun cast a warm glow over his face as the Latin words flowed from his lips in a rich, deep voice. But for the movement of his lips, the priest's face was utterly still and smooth.

Thomas saw that, though the priest's short-cropped dark hair held a dusting of white, his body was strong and straight. Father Vincent raised his arms high to intone a final blessing over the collection of men and women and Thomas tried to think what he knew of the man.

The Meade's farm was separated from the village and other settlers by the mission and enormous Calvert holdings that hemmed it. Though the Jesuits and their Piscataway charges lived more than two miles from the Meades by way of the colony's winding paths, they were the family's nearest neighbors. Thomas had occasionally visited the mission to deliver cows for breeding to the mission's bull, but this contact had always been with Brother Gregory or the Piscataway steward, Simon. In fact, if Thomas had considered Father Vincent at all before Betty's death, it had only been to make an envious listing of the rich lands under the Jesuit's control.

Not of a religious nature, Thomas Meade had given little thought to church matters in Maryland except to be thankful it was a place where a man could live removed from a church and government that fancied itself ruler of body and soul. Still, Thomas realized many of the other settlers did not feel the same. The recently arrived Puritans had not been silent in their contention that the Catholic founders of Maryland and the natives who had lived their long before any Europeans arrived were, in fact, intruders in God's 'new kingdom.' Now that Thomas thought on it, he saw a strange irony in the fact that the men ejected from one home after another would find issue with the beliefs of the only ones who had welcomed them. He wondered at the timorousness of the Catholic nobles, who still carried considerable weight in the young colony, that they would allow such grumbling. Caught up in these thoughts, Thomas had not noticed that the mass had ended, and he was startled to find Vincent by his side, a friendly smile lighting his well-cut face.

"Good morning, Master Meade. I hope it's not further grief that brings you back to us."

"Oh, no, no," Thomas said, then added, "Thomas, please call me Thomas."

The priest nodded and, putting a hand to Thomas' shoulder, turned him toward the rectory. "And Vincent will do for me. Can I offer you a little coffee to take off the morning chill? It is very much the fashion in France and Italy, but I, unfortunately, am of the nature to turn fashion into compulsion. It is now impossible for me to begin a day without my coffee."

Thomas hesitated, but Father Vincent pressed on. "Come now. Haven't you heard what the Puritans say about me? They're quite certain that I am the root of all that is evil; a dark specter in a woman's gown. Surely, you can't hope to resist my temptations?" The priest arched a brow devilishly.

"Yes, I had had heard that about you," Thomas answered with a chuckle. "Though, as a rule, I don't pay any mind to what the Puritans say; a little trick I learned when I was forced to attend their services back home. In fact, I was just thinking this was a better place before they came. The Virginians were wise to banish them and the Calverts foolish to let them come."

Father Vincent said nothing, but his wry smile hinted at agreement. He took a step toward the rectory and Thomas followed. Newly, curious about the man under the cassock, Thomas had listened closely, not only to the Jesuit's words, but also to the manner in which they'd been spoken. He'd caught a familiar rhythm behind the unaccented speech. "You're from the North? Malcolm and Claire, our servants, are from the borderlands of Scotland. Your speech sounds similar."

"Aye, Northumberland," Father Vincent said, letting the full measure of his native dialect out in the two words. "You've a good ear. I've not been home since I was fourteen. This Malcolm, what is his family name?"

"No one knows. He and Claire were orphaned young and became wards of the church. They were passed southward, hand to hand until we agreed to take them on as members of our household. They journeyed here entered in the ship log as Meades, so I suppose they're counted my kin." Thomas increased his pace, surprised to see the much smaller priest was out striding him. When he was again alongside Vincent, he continued with Malcolm and Claire's story. "They've been free a year but work for

us on wages. Malcolm will leave us once he patents land, Claire when she finds a husband.”

“I’d like to meet them. I miss my home,” Father Vincent pulled open the rectory door and held it for Thomas to enter.

Thomas had no recollection of the rectory’s interior from his visit a few nights before and now noted that it was smaller than his own home and nearly bare of any furnishings. In England, he’d heard so much about the rich living of the Catholic clergy, he’d half expected to find the walls draped with silks and the floors layered with Moorish carpets.

The two men sat at a small table as Brother Gregory, nodding in greeting at Thomas, set down two speckled earthenware cups filled with a thick, black liquid. The steam rising from the cups was rich and smoky. Father Vincent passed Thomas a bowl of dark honey. “Another vice.” Thomas stirred in a spoonful then sipped the hot liquid, raising his eyebrows in surprise at its wonderful flavor. The priest smiled then asked, “To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?”

“Again, it is the matter of a child. Yesterday, I found a small girl, perhaps seven or eight, tangled in flotsam at the edge of the river. Actually, it was Jamie, my boy, who found her.”

“Alive?”

“Yes, thankfully, but badly beaten from her trip down the river and chilled near to death. We bathed her and put her to bed. She slept still when I left to come here.

“A native, I take it from your consulting me.”

“Yes, I believe she is, though you’ll see she is not typical in her appearance.”

The priest drained his cup. Turning to Brother Gregory, he said, “Go tell Simon of this and that I want him with me on the chance the child does not speak a dialect I know.” Turning back to Thomas, Father Vincent added with a wink, “You’ll find the walk back livelier for having drunk that coffee.”

Thomas swallowed the final mouthful from his cup, and, with a buzzing sensation in his head, followed Father Vincent out the door.

##

A young man was milking in the Meade's barnyard when the three men arrived. He hummed quietly, his head pressed against the cow's flank. Small and dark, the youth had the sharp features Vincent associated with those who had known hunger and hardship in childhood. The young man worked with his eyes closed, but Vincent could see the orbs rolling beneath the lids as though following some imagined action. It reminded the priest of his father's hunting dogs who would like by the great hall's fire after a day in the fields and forests, their lips curling in snarls and paws twitching as they pursued some prey in their sleep.

"Malcolm," Thomas Meade said nudging the young man's shoulder.

Malcolm's eyes snapped open and Vincent saw that the irises were so dark they blended with the pupils. It was somehow disturbing and Vincent found his tone unintentionally cool when he spoke. "I didn't know there was any here from the North but me." He tried for a friendlier timbre. "We'll have to sit together over a cup of cider and talk of the Northlands."

"I've few good memories of it," Malcolm said as he buried his head again in the cow's flank.

"Aye, it is a hard land and a hard land makes for a hard people. But, it is also a place that puts music in the heart of all who call it home.

"I call this home. And, the good Lord willing, I'll not see the other again." Malcolm's hands had stopped their rhythmic pulling on the cow's teats as he and the priest had spoken, but, with these words, he returned to his work, his pace quicker and pulls sharper. The cow shifted and swung her tail peevishly at the rough treatment.

Vincent looked at Thomas to see if he would reprimand his servant for his rudeness, but the planter only shrugged his heavy shoulders and walked away. Vincent followed him. At the garden gate, Thomas stopped. "Malcolm has begun participating in the Puritan meetings and they've filled his head with all their nonsense about Catholicism and the natives. I've had words with him about it, but he won't listen. He's quite taken with the minister's daughter, ugly thing that she is."

Before Vincent could respond, a tow-headed boy ran through the garden and threw his arms around Meade's stout legs. "She won't talk to me," the child cried up at his father. Thomas brushed a lock of hair from the boy's eyes, but said nothing. They stepped in the open door and a cloud of corn-scented steam engulfed them.

Vincent's past visit, to comfort Joan after the loss of Betty, had been at night and he'd not formed much of an impression of the Meade's home. Now, he noted that the house was large and showed signs of some wealth the family had brought with them from England. Morning sun streamed through two glazed windows and the small diamond-shaped panes cast a delicate patter of shadows across a heavy, round table that stood at the center of the room. The hearth sat at the room's far side. In the English style, it rose through the core of the house and its firebox and facing were of brick, not the wattle and daub used in most of the colony's buildings. Several pieces of fine glassware adorned the mantle. A large feather mattress was neatly rolled and stored in a corner along with an impressive stack of chairs, enough to seat the family and several guests.

Squatting by the fire, a pretty young woman with the same dark coloring as the bondsman outside, stirred a pot of corn pudding while clattering noises and huffs of frustration came from a room on the far side of the hearth. "I don't see it. I'll have the man's guts for garters if he and the boy have snuck out my last crock of honey. Are you sure you put it on the center shelf?"

"Aye, Ma'am. If you come stir the pot, I'll find it," the serving girl said as she rose. Seeing the men, she bobbed awkwardly then rushed around the hearth as her mistress pushed by her.

Joan Meade stopped when she saw the men and a blush crept up her neck, giving her face a youthful glow. “You could warn me of company with a cough, husband. I’d rather our guest not hear me curse you.”

“I’d rather not hear it myself,” Thomas said with a faint smile. Vincent watched Joan Meade’s face soften as she and her husband held each other’s gaze for a moment. Though she appeared tired and her eyes were still swollen from the tears she’d shed for her lost child, Vincent could see the beauty, that though dimmed a bit by time, still spoke to the draw she must have had to capture and hold a man of Thomas’ stature and strength.

“Father Vincent and his man have come to try to speak with the child. Where is she? She can’t be up and about?” Thomas turned back to the door and gestured that Simon should step across the threshold, where, wary of offending, the Piscataway had stopped.

“No, no. I had Claire carry her up to the loft so she could rest without being underfoot. She woke not long after you’d left and I gave her warm milk. I imagine she’s sleeping again.” Joan turned to Vincent. “Thank you, Father, for your visit the other night. It was a comfort.”

“Good,” Vincent said then fell silent, unable to think of anything else to say that would not seem trite in the face of the family’s sorrow. Joan returned to her work, and, relieved, the priest followed Thomas and Simon up the narrow stairs that wound behind the hearth to the loft.

The shutters were open on the loft’s dormer windows. A soft breeze luffed lace curtains and filled the room with an incense-like scent of pine. The girl lay on a cot. Her long, dark hair fanned across the white pillow like a bird’s wing. She’d been dressed in a white shift and the loose fabric of the sleeves draped across the blanket pulled to her chest. She lay with her bandaged hands folded on her belly and the priest thought she slept until a soft smile lifted the corners of her mouth. Slowly, she opened her eyes and looked at each man in turn, no fear in her expression.

Vincent stepped forward and knelt by the bed, his cassock ballooning around him. The child turned her head to look at him and he spoke to her softly in the local Algonquin dialect. The child's expression did not change, but she reached out a finger and stilled his lips. At the instant of her touch, a jolt coursed through Vincent's body. The world receded, leaving only a blinding light and a ringing in his head. Warmth spread through Vincent like a swallow of strong wine.

Something clasped Vincent's elbow. His vision returned like surfacing from below water and, with it, the sight of the Meade's timber ceiling -- patching, where the limb had protruded, lighter and raw looking against the smoke-stains of the rest. Simon crouched at Vincent's side.

"I'm fine," Vincent said as he pushed back up to his knees. "I just caught my boot in the hem of my cassock," he said giving his vestment a derisive tug. Then, to distract Thomas from his discomposure, he added, "She must not be from one of the Potomac tribes. Simon, you try."

Simon rose to his feet and spoke without stepping nearer to the girl. Vincent watched her face as Simon tried three different Algonquin dialects. Her expression did not change.

"Perhaps she pretends not to understand, but I do not believe so," Simon said. "She is not Piscataway. Look at her eyes. Blue like one of your people. Perhaps she is a half-cast from across the river. He abruptly barked a few guttural words in a harsh voice. The child offered no reaction.

"Not Susquehannock," the priest said to Thomas, who'd stepped forward, his hands fisted as if he meant to throttle Simon for his rough tone with the child. "I speak little of their language, but I know no Susquehannock would have tolerated hearing those words. That's why Simon spoke to her as he did." Vincent was relieved to see his explanation mollify the angry planter. Thomas Meade looked at the girl and then walked to the open dormer window. Leaning out, he gave a sharp whistle.

"Yes?" Vincent heard a child's voice call up from the garden. By his side, the girl gave no sign of having heard the piercing sound.

“Deaf,” Vincent said with a nod of understanding.

The big planter nodded, too. He walked to the child’s bed and lightly touched her bandaged hand. Vincent’s eyes flew to Thomas’ face to see if it registered any sensation from the touch. The planter’s face was warm but still. He quietly turned and walked down the stairs. Simon followed but Vincent hovered by the cot. When the other men’s heads had disappeared down the steep stairs, he sketched a cross in the air over the girl and then reluctantly turned to the stairs, feeling the girl’s eyes on his back as he walked away.

##

***Journal of Vincent Burton, S. J., Saint Mary’s City, Maryland Colony
September 11, 1667 – Feast of St. Grimonia, Child of the forest and martyr***

This morning, as I offered mass, I was filled with a peace more complete than any I have felt since landing on these shores. I cannot explain this sudden contentment as anything except an answered prayer.

Thomas Meade awaited me when the mass was done. I found I was glad to see him again. In the past, I’ve given Meade and the other Anglican planters little thought. But, I have been remiss in doing so. It’s a shame we haven’t more Catholics of Meade’s nature. These men, not priests or displaced nobles, are the stone and mortar on which this new world will be built.

A busy man, Meade, of course, came with a purpose. Yesterday, he found a small girl, apparently swept here by the river’s flood and nearly drowned from her journey. Simon and I went to her in the hopes we could learn her origins and contact her people, but it seems the child is deaf and mute. Simon will travel upriver to see if any will claim her. She will stay among the Meades until his return

Therein are the facts of the event. Now, I must turn to things that cannot so easily be labelled as fact. There is an otherworldliness to the child that I cannot explain. Though she apparently experienced

a considerable physical ordeal and now finds herself among strangers, she shows no distress or fear. She is deaf and surely cannot know what we say from the movement of our lips in foreign language, yet she seems to understand all that is said in her presence. I have no proof that this is so, only an overwhelming sense that it is. Similarly, though she is very young, there is a wisdom in her expression, a mature directness in her gaze. And, what a gaze it is. Her eyes are of the deepest blue; the same blue they use to paint the Virgin's gown in paintings. Even the brilliance of her eyes, however, cannot compare to the sensation of her touch. It is inexplicable, like describing light to one who has lived only in darkness. It is heat that does not burn; force that does not press; a trumpet blast heard in the mind. It is all these and yet none of these. I am at once compelled to feel it again and frightened lest I find it is no longer so, as the Meades, who have bathed her and cared for her report no such reaction.

I asked the Meades to call her Bea in honor of the Saint on whose feast day she was sent to us, the Saint who I feel has somehow answered my prayer.

Chapter 3

The men all rose at once and the meetinghouse, which had fallen into an awkward silence, filled with the noise of chairs scraping and feet shuffling. Edward Tulliver walked to the open door. The mingled smells of lye soap and smoke drifted in from the yard. He looked about, hoping for some sign of Rebecca, but saw only Abby leaning over the washtub, her sleeves rolled to her elbows, her long, thin face flushed and damp from the steam. Disappointed, Edward was about to turn and bid his guests farewell when he noticed Malcolm Meade seated under one of the young sycamores Edward had brought from Virginia and planted on the day he'd claimed this lot. The young man's dark eyes followed Abby as if she was performing some intricate dance, not washing the family's soiled clothing. Drawing a deep breath, Edward resolved to talk to them both. It wouldn't do for Malcolm to be seen paying the girl such attention before being accepted into the covenanted community.

A hand clasped Edward's shoulder and he looked down at it. The nails were long and yellow, the knuckles swollen, skin thin and pale like an onion peel. Swallowing back his revulsion, the minister placed his own hand over the other and shifted to face the church elder.

"I told the others you would see the good in what we recommend, Edward. It would be shameful to let such an act go unpunished. If the Catholic devils charged with care of the colony will not see the laws of God enforced, we must."

Edward nodded then stepped aside to let the knot of dark-clothed men through the door. Following them into the yard, he looked quietly toward the tree where Malcolm Meade had been sitting.

and was relieved to find him gone. He gestured to his daughter and she silently rose from her washing and walked into the house as he ushered the men past the meetinghouse and out into the lane that bisected the Puritan settlement.

When Edward returned to the cottage, Malcolm was standing in the narrow passageway to the larder, his shoulder pressed against the wall as he watched Abby going about her work. Edward gave a little cough and the young man spun around, his lips pulling in a nervous smile.

“Reverend Tulliver, I’m sorry to have entered your home wi’out permission, but there is a matter I wished to report that I thought best no to raise in front of the others.”

“Where is your mother?” Edward asked Abby, ignoring Malcolm’s apology.

The girl looked up from the tankard she was washing. She swiped at a lock of drab hair that had snuck from beneath her cap. “Rebecca has gone into the woods. I think she meant to pick something. She had a basket on her arm.”

Edward scowled but said nothing to his daughter, instead turning to Malcolm. “So, what is this pressing matter that has you skulking about my yard and house?” He lifted his hat and ran his hands over the downy fuzz that covered his well-shaped head like the felt on the underside of the broad sycamore leaves. He’d lost his hair young and had found his baldness an embarrassment until he noted the pleasure Rebecca took in it. Now, even the touch of his own work-roughened fingers recalled her stroking of it.

Where was she?

Edward looked around the cottage. It was in disorder – their mattress and bedding still spread on the floor, bundles of herbs strewn across the table. The elders had surely noted the mess and Rebecca’s absence, when they’d first come to call him to the meetinghouse him. Edward could imagine them even now whispering among themselves; picking at Rebecca’s character like crows at a carcass.

Sitting, he looked up at Malcolm then gestured impatiently at another chair. He wanted to go find his wife not talk to this North-born bondsman. Malcolm sat, rubbing his hands across his knees nervously. Her work in the larder done, Abby went back out to the yard to continue the laundry. Both men watched her pass and Edward wondered at Malcolm's attraction to her. He'd always thought his daughter quite plain. She lacked vitality and he'd often wondered how his strength had failed to carry into his *children*. *Why were they all drab and dull as the mother, his first wife, had been?* Edward examined Malcolm more closely and decided he was not particular prize – too dark, too small, too nervous. How could this slip of a man ever have dreamed of courting Rebecca? Edward recalled how he'd laughed when Malcolm – sure he had to reveal his darkest secrets to his pastor if he was to be covenanted -- had first confessed his past infatuation with Rebecca. But then Edward had imagined how he'd have felt if Rebecca had rejected him and felt a throb of sympathy for Malcolm. That sympathy warmed him again and he gave Malcolm a quick but sincere smile. The relief it brought the young man was evident and Edward regretted his impatience. *He'd been right to agree to facilitate the boy's quick acceptance into the community so he and Abby could be wed. Malcolm was a hard worker and likely to prosper. And, it would be a relief to have the last child of his first marriage out of his and Rebecca's home.*

"Have you settled on a lot?" Edward asked.

Malcolm shook his head.

"You should. There's no use testifying until you're out from under Thomas Meade's roof."

Malcolm nodded but said nothing. In the silence, Edward listened to the frustrated hum of a wasp trapped in the rafters. He folded his arms across his chest and felt with satisfaction the pull of his clothes over the ropey muscles of his back. He worked hard to supplement the congregation's small stipend with income off the land. And, he took pride in being able to match the young men when it came time to fell a

tree or bring in the hay. No one would accuse him of living the soft life embraced by so many others who turned to the ministry – soul merchant, not soul cultivators as he thought himself.

“Well, if not that, then what is it you need to tell me?”

“The Meades, they’ve brought a savage into their home. A lass Thomas and Jamie found nearly drowned in the river. She was battered, naked, badly chilled, but they’ve nursed her the past few days and she appears to be rapidly healing. The priest has come to see here, he and is Indian. But they didn’t know her.”

Malcom fell silent and Edward could see indecision playing over his face. “Come, now. This is unsavory, but not enough for you to have felt the need to see me. I can see there’s more. You do yourself no favors protecting the Meades if it means you must keep secrets from me.”

“I don’t want anyone to think I mean to criticize the Thomas and Joan’s generosity. They’ve done nothing but help a strange child. They did the same for Claire and I when we were children.” Malcolm fiddled with the sleeve of his linen shirt for a moment then looked up with a sigh. “But, it is not wholesome. The Meades may not see it but there is something strange about the lass. She’s an Indian and yet her eyes are blue. My sister, Claire, insists they are the prettiest eyes she’s ever seen. Claire says that the child’s eyes make her feel like she did on the most peaceful days of our voyage here – like she’s being rocked by the sea and caressed by the sky. She’s verra taken with the child, but I ... I doona...” Malcolm faltered, but then blurted, “The child, when she looks at me, it’s as if I’m being pierced, turned inside out.” Malcolm raised a hand to his forehead and then dropped it to his chest, almost as if he meant to sketch a figure of the cross as the Catholics did.

Edward, his gray eyes unblinking, watched Malcolm closely. He’d long ago learned to give more credence to faces and hands than to words. Perhaps feeling the older man’s unwavering gaze on him, Malcolm balled his hands into fists, dropped them to his sides then barked in an abrupt, almost angry voice, “She’s a deaf-mute.”

“A what?” Edward asked, startled by the rapid change in the young man’s demeanor.

“A deaf-mute. She canna hear nor speak.”

“Yes. I know what a deaf-mute is.”

Edward rose and walked to the door. Malcolm followed him and stepped out, his face showing confusion to be so abruptly dismissed.

“You should get out of the Meade’s household as quickly as possible,” Edward instructed.

“When people learn of this – of the Meades sharing their home with a savage – it could hurt your efforts to be covenanted.”

Malcolm nodded and stepped down to the yard. He stopped by Abby. She looked up and they spoke quietly for a moment then Malcolm walked out the gate and headed down the path that led to the larger village of St. Mary’s. Edward watched him go through the open cottage door.

He found the news of the foundling troubling. There were few natives left along the lower reaches of the rivers and the ones who remained were the Jesuits’ converts. Though Edward was not admirer of Catholics, it seemed to him, an Indian who knew Christ, even if it was a Christ draped in layers of Popish foppery, was better than a pagan. And, he’d had some success convincing the congregation that accepting the mission and its natives was the cost they had to pay to remain in Maryland. But, he knew that many of his congregations members were not sanguine in their tolerance. In fact, there was a contingent that insisted that the Indians would eventually have to be driven away or the Lord’s disfavor would befall them all. That contingent would surely be enflamed by this child’s presence. The girl was surely a pagan and her physical abnormalities would be seen as signs of evil as would her appearance on the tail of the fiercest tempest any could recall.

Edward knew his authority as minister had blossomed under the test of the community’s expulsion from Virginia only to be tarnished by his instance on marrying Rebecca. None begrudged him a new wife, nor his interest in a young woman who could still bear children. But Rebecca was viewed

with suspicion; had been a target of gossip for a lack of modesty. For the spiritual leader of the congregation to insist on taking such a woman tested their tolerance. Now, with this matter of the Smythe boy that the elders had come to discuss and the storm, with its destruction of the crops; some were sure believe the Lord was turning an unfavorable eye upon them. The presence of this pagan child would further upset many and they would, of course, call on Edward for a solution.

The minister looked about the yard searching for some relief from the sudden gloom that had descended upon him. He turned to Abby. “Still no sign of your mother?”

“No, Rebecca has not returned.” Abby stood, unfolding her angular body. She was taller than Edward, who, though powerfully built, was quite short. Reaching into the tub with a raw, chapped hand, she pulled out the bedding from Edward and Rebecca’s bed.

Edward shifted uncomfortably. He did not like his daughter washing he and her stepmother’s bedding. Embarrassed, he stepped back toward the house, but stopped on the threshold. “Why won’t you call her mother?” he asked, his eyes trained on the leaves fluttering above his daughter’s head.

There was a splash as Abby plunged the bedding into the rinse basin. She gave a brittle laugh. “She was my only friend before she was your wife, Father. And, as a friend, I called her Rebecca.”

Edward felt his face flush. He knew Abby felt she’d lost her friend to her father. In fact, she had. Rebecca had been Abby’s closest companion though she was four years Abby’s elder. Both had been avoided by the other village girls – Abby because her father was the minister and his congregation feared that a close friendship between his children and theirs could expose a family’s transgressions and Rebecca because of her inability to conform to the community’s strict standards of decorum. But that closeness between the young women had not survived he and Rebecca’s wedding. Abby seemed to still long for it; but, Rebecca had told him that the world he’d opened to her as a husband made the four years that separated them feel like a lifetime.

Abby again squatted on her haunches and took up her scrubbing. “Perhaps, once she’s had a child of her own, it will be easier for me to think of Rebecca as your wife and my mother.” Though Edward knew that his daughter’s words were meant to mollify him, they had no soothing effect on his agitation. Turning away from the girl, he walked into the cottage, shut the door firmly behind him and leaned his back against it.

Were others beginning to anticipate he and Rebecca having a child? After a year of marriage with no issue, did they question his ability to put a child in her belly; his ability to please her? He shook his head at the absurdity of the notion that any Puritan would consider that a man had to please a woman to impregnate her. Rebecca’s pleasure in their lovemaking had been a revelation to him. At first, her eager response to his touch had frightened him a little but he’d come to relish finding new ways to please her. He remembered the feel of her slender waist in his hands and felt his gorge rise at the thought of having it thicken and swell around a child, around another being inside her.

Pushing away from the door, he began to pace.

So many women died in childbirth and Rebecca was so very small. He wanted only to spare her the danger.

He stopped by his writing stand. Slowly extending his hand, he touched the bible that rested there. Opening the heavy book to a page at random, he let his finger fall on a line in the second chapter of John’s Gospel – *for the truth’s sake which abides in us and shall be with us to eternity*. Edward shut the book and, resting it on its spine, released it so it fell open again. He scanned the page from Micah and his eye caught another line – *for her rich men are full of violence, and her inhabitants speak lies, and their tongue is deceitful in their mouth*. With a sigh, he shut the book.

“I lie?” he asked the empty cottage. He held his breath, waiting for some sign that his conclusion was false but none came and he quietly closed the book. “Yes, I can see that I do,” he whispered. It’s not

danger that I wish to spare Rebecca; it is distraction. She's mine and I won't share her with another, not even with eh child we would make together.

Retrieving his hat, Edward walked out and past his daughter. The gate creaked as he opened it and he walked straight-backed and solemn down the path along which the homes of the covenanted families were clustered. But, one among the trees at the village edge, he began to run.

##

Edward had nearly given up hope of finding Rebecca when he saw a flash of gold among the slender, pale trunks of a grove of birch trees. Bearing for it, he quickened his pace. His breathing loud in his own ears, he pressed through the bracken as the edge of the grove. Rebecca, her back to him, crouched and dug at something among the intertwined roots of the trees.

"You're not wearing a cap." Edward bent and braced his hands on his knees trying to catch his breath.

Rebecca looked up with a startled expression that quickly changed to a smile. She shook her head. "No, no, I'm not." Rising, she wound between the tree's trunks toward him. When she drew near, Edward reached out and touched a lock of her hair that had worked loose from her braid. It glowed golden and seemed almost alive, almost liquid, like honey.

"You should always wear a cap." He wound the lock around his finger then worked the fingers of his other hand into the hair at her temple, loosening her braid further. Rebecca closed her eyes and leaned into his touch, like a cat asking to be stroked. "What will people think if they see you with no cap and your braid all a mess?" he asked with a smile.

"That I'm beautiful."

Edward laughed softly and gave her hair a mild tug. "Yes."

“Besides, which people do you mean?” Rebecca opened her slanted amber eyes and looked about dramatically. “I see not people.” She stepped closer yet, so close Edward could smell her, tangy like crushed grass. His hand in her hair tightened and she gave a little sigh then pressed her face into his neck. Her fingers pulled at the tie of Edward’s shirt where it cut into his throat. He took off his hat and, dropping it to the ground, buried his nose in Rebecca’s hair. It was warm from the sun. His hands wrapped around her ribs, his fingers nearly touching at her spine. She stepped back and began unlacing her bodice.

“No, you mustn’t. Someone may come,” Edward said but he did nothing to interfere with the work of her fingers.

“No one will come, silly man. We are freer to do as we please here in the forest than in the cottage where Abby sleeps just above us in the loft.” Rebecca took a deep breath as she finished her unlacing. “Oh, it feels so good to be free of those stays.” As Edward reached for her, she gave an impish smile then spun and pressed her backside against him.

Edward gasped as she led one of his hands around her to her breast. He closed his eyes and rocked his head back so his upturned face caught the sunlight streaming through the lacy canopy cast by the birches as they swayed in a breeze. He lifted Rebecca’s skirt and, running his fingers up her thigh, grasped her hip. Moving languidly, Rebecca raised her arms over her head, wrapping them around his neck then lightly caressing the back of his head. Edward quickly unbuttoned his breeches, leaned Rebecca forward until her face rested against the papery bark of the birch’s trunk, then pressed into her. He raised his face to the sky; the feathery touch of the shade dappled sunlight like a soft kiss on his eyelids.