

SUSAN VERRICO



PRIVATEER'S
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For Jerry, Gerard, and Keith

With all my love

—S. V.





PROLOGUE

The Night before Auction
The 1st day of June
The year of our Lord 1713
Charles Towne, Carolina Territory

I, Jameson Martin Cooper, make note of these recent events in memory of my father, a recorder of words and deeds. On the eve of his passing, when his hands had ceased to write, he beckoned me closer. "A foolish man," he whispered, "casts his memories to the wind. A wise man puts them to paper."

I shall heed my father's advice, for memories are all that are left me. Though it pains me to remember, I must start at the beginning, when on a day last spring, my life turned for the worse.

In January, word traveled to us that the citizens of Jamestown were under attack—not by the Indians who normally plagued them, but by an outbreak of fiery, pus-filled sores that brought fever and chills and left its victims dead within the week. Trade was halted and ships bound from Jamestown turned back, but the disease came to us on the wind and in the streams and by the middle of February, fifteen of our neighbors lay dead.

My mother strangled on the boils in March. They filled her throat, stealing her breath and wrapping around her words until she could do naught but moan. When they erupted she spat forth the

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pus and blood, gagging and clawing at her throat. I stayed by my father's side and helped him tend to her, mopping my mother's face and cleaning away the mess that spewed from her until the afternoon she grew still. Twenty days later, I did the same for my father.

Someday, when my hair is the color of chalk and my back is stooped and crooked with age, I will unroll this parchment and remember the days following my parents' deaths, when I lived on the streets like a beggar. In my mind's eye, I will travel once more to the dark alley where I slept amongst the rats behind a stack of wooden crates. I will feel the claws of a yellow-striped alley cat rake across my hand and remember our fight over a scrap of fat that had dropped from the meat vendor's cart, for I'd had nothing to eat for three days. And though I would like to forget forever that September morning when I walked past the baker's house, I know that someday long from now, I shall smooth this crumpled page and the scent of the hot jellied bread that lured me inside and to my terrible fate will still linger in the air.

The light from the jailer's lantern casts shadows upon nearby walls, and the jingle of his keys tells me the time for writing has passed for now. I must hide my quill and look toward the future, for it is the eve before auction and my heart bursts with fear. What will become of me?

—JMC

CHAPTER ONE

Strabo hangs his lantern on the peg inside the cell and belches loudly as if to announce his arrival. I smell the stink that floats from him like onions left rotting on a summer field. A hazy light falls upon the prisoners who sleep nearby, snoring beneath whatever rag they have been fortunate enough to claim.

"Wake up, you lazy louts!" Strabo bellows, lashing out with a booted foot. His morning routine is always the same, and so I am prepared for his attack. I roll sideways and manage to avoid most of the blow. Still, his foot grazes my chest, and I feel the metal nib of my quill dig into my rib. Scrambling to my feet, I pray the tiny bottle of ink hidden inside my vest pocket has not suffered a crack.

Strabo moves to the center of the cramped cell and pulls chunks of black bread from a sack tied at his waist. He flings them onto the straw-covered floor as if he is tossing bones to dogs.

"'Tis a light breakfast we serve our guests this morning," he says with a smirk. "Compliments of our mighty Queen Anne."

The old woman called Netty scrambles from beneath her blanket. With bits of straw sticking in her hair, she grabs two large pieces of the bread. Still on her knees, she turns and offers one. "Take it, boy," she urges, her speech marred by a

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missing front tooth. "Twill be a long day and no supper, I'm sure."

I shake my head. "No thank you, ma'am," I reply, watching the others devour the meager fare. That they eat with such gusto amazes me. Who can eat on such a day?

Strabo pulls open the jail's thick oak door and makes it stay by wedging a large stone against the wood. Light spills in, sending spiders and roaches scurrying for dark corners. Breathing deeply, he waves his arm, marked with ink on the muscle, toward a pale blue sky. "Such a fine day you've picked to depart my lovely inn," he says.

Having not felt the sun in more than a fortnight, I move closer to the door. I scan the street, at the same time wondering why I bother. I know of no one who might come to my aid. A woman glances at me as she passes and then quickly looks away. My face grows hot when I see the disgust that clouds her eyes. *How ragged I must look*, I think, unable to recall the last time I washed. Had I bathed at all since the burials? I frown, trying to remember, but the memory won't come. My parents' deaths have left my mind clouded and my memory full of hollow spots.

Days spent living in the alley like a stray hound have left me filthy. My shirt, splotted with stains, hangs loose over breeches torn at both knees. I brush away a handful of the straw that a stable boy delivered yesterday and knock off a chunk of cow dung stuck to my leg. Pinching a gorged tick between my fingers, I fling it onto the floor. I rake my fingers through my tangled blond hair, wincing, for I had scratched my head bloody the night before, and afterwards, picked squished fleas from beneath my nails. My father often said that the markings of a true gentleman were found in his penmanship and appearance. He would surely twist in his grave if he saw me now.

Cupping my hands together, I spit into my palms, rub the

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saliva over my face, and dry it with a swipe of my sleeve. A prisoner, his red-veined nose heavily pitted from the pox, thrusts his face so close to mine that I can smell the rot from his teeth. "Going to a grand ball, are you?" he sneers. "Making yourself pretty for the ladies?"

I open my mouth to tell him that his breath smells as if he has feasted on skunk cabbage, but I turn away instead. Since my arrest last month, I have learned to bite my tongue. And a hard lesson it was to learn, one that brought several clouts to my head and painful twists to my ears.

"Gather your things and line up!" Strabo yells, kicking the prisoners within his reach. The others scramble for their belongings, slapping and cursing each other for grabbing what isn't theirs to take. I lean against the wall and watch. I have nothing to gather; all that my father had owned—the printing press and boxes of metal type, the peacock quills and silver nibs, and the five crates of ink that had arrived in March from England—was gone, seized by a stranger who claimed them as payment of a debt owed.

After my father's death, I shut myself up inside the print shop, pulling the front curtain so that not even a speck of light could creep inside. The neighbors left me alone, perhaps still fearful that disease clung to me. I paced the rooms day and night, sleeping only after fits of crying that struck me without warning. Eventually, a few customers came knocking, asking for the return of payments given to my father for work he had not completed before death snatched him up. I had discovered a small sack of coins in my father's desk, and so I was able to satisfy their demands.

Then, two weeks after the posting of my father's death notice, a silver-bearded man accompanied by Constable Smyth knocked on the print shop's door. I allowed them to enter, for I thought another customer sought the return of his deposit. Instead, the bearded man claimed that my father had borrowed

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money from him to fund a recent shipment of supplies. I told the constable I did not believe such a tale—my father had prided himself on avoiding all debts—but as proof the man produced a document bearing the name of my father, Jonathan Cooper. I protested that the signature was nothing like his, for the letters looked as if they had been written by a chicken whose foot had been dipped in ink and not by a printer as highly skilled as my father. I even brought out a bill of sale and showed it to the constable, pointing out the delicate lettering that identified the mark as my father's. But he refused to accept it, saying that I could have easily signed the document myself. The constable declared I must pay what was owed by noon the next day, or the print shop would be seized and awarded to the bearded man as compensation for the debt.

With no way to pay, I rose early the next morning so that I would be gone before the constable returned. I dressed in my best breeches and shirt, pulling my father's printing vest over it so that I might use the inside pockets to carry the few things I would take with me. In one chest pocket I hid what remained of the coins I'd found in my father's desk, and in the other, a single roll of parchment with a tiny bottle of ink and a new quill tucked safely inside. Little remained in the pantry, but I wrapped what I could carry inside a kitchen cloth—a small wheel of cheese, several slices of salted pork that I had fried the night before, a half loaf of bread, and two dried apples. And then I pulled on my boots and set out, glancing back often until the house grew smaller and smaller and finally disappeared from view. I had no place to go, and so I walked the streets that first day. When dusk fell, I found a hiding place in the alley, wedged between the butcher's shop and the baker's house.

Grabbing my arm, Netty draws closer. Her mouth moves furiously as she chews the last bite of her bread. "Stay close to

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the top of the line, boy," she whispers, wiping drool from her chin, "for those near the end suffer most."

I grip her hand. "How so?"

She picks a flea from her blanket. "They are within swift reach of Strabo's whip."

Strabo's eyes dart over the cell. "Line up, and be quick," he commands.

Clutching her blanket, Netty pushes past me and stretches out her arms. Strabo loops a thick rope around her wrists and yanks hard. I move in behind her, but Strabo shoves me from the line. "Brats in the back!" he snaps.

Netty turns to me. "Keep your steps lively and your head low," she murmurs.

I am the last prisoner to be tethered to the sixteen-foot stretch of hemp. I wince as Strabo gives the rope a hard tug, causing the braided threads to cut into my wrists. He cracks his whip and points it to the open door. The line of prisoners shuffles forward and I turn for a last look, thinking it odd that I should hate to leave such a place. However, for two weeks, upon dawn and dusk, my belly has been filled. And on stormy nights, when rain trickled through the wall cracks, I snuggled deeper into the damp straw, unmindful of the roaches that bedded with me. For more than a fortnight, I'd felt a comfort I hadn't known since before my parents' deaths. Now, as the rope jerks me forward, it occurs to me that I might never know such comfort again.

Outside, I squint into the morning sun, grateful for the sudden warmth that floods my bones. For a moment I feel weak with the joy of breathing air that has not been tainted by the stench of filthy bodies.

"Start the walk!" Strabo yells, pointing his whip toward Charles Towne's harbor, where the auction will take place.

I stumble along behind the others, careful to keep my eyes

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upon the ground. The summer rains have left Charles Towne's narrow streets pitted, and every step brings the risk of a twisted ankle. More than that, I fear I might pass someone who will recognize me as the son of Charles Towne's finest printer and see me as I am now, a condemned thief to be sold to the highest bidder. I keep my head down, watching only the feet that go before me. I do not look up again until the air turns moist and I smell the sea. At the sight of the harbor, my heart begins to pound and my stomach quivers. Never had I believed this day would come.

Charles Towne's citizens stride busily around Harbor Square, but they pause to stare as we approach. Several children jumping over strewn pebbles stop and grow quiet. I notice the freckle-faced boy immediately. In the bright sunlight, his hair looks to be on fire. An older girl in a blue plaid dress watches him play. I think it must be the boy's sister for she has the same flame-colored hair. The girl looks nervously at us and draws the basket of eggs she carries close to her chest.

"Look over here!" the freckled boy shouts, waving his arms above his head like a windmill. He seems to be looking right at me.

Thinking he is saying hello, I lift my chin in greeting. The boy grabs an egg from his sister's basket and hurls it so quickly I don't see it coming. It smashes into my nose, spraying globs of yellow yolk and sending blood streaming from my nostrils. For a moment, I am stunned. Then anger sweeps through me and I lunge at the boy. But Strabo's knots hold, and I fall to my knees, my arms stretched out before me. Before I can stand, the line moves forward, and I can only grab hold of the ropes and pull back to keep my arms from being ripped from their sockets. From the corner of my eye, I see the girl with the eggs darting toward me. She grabs my arm and helps me to my feet. Pulling a red cloth from her basket, she wipes the dripping yolk from my cheek and speaks in a low voice.

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"I'm Suzanne Le Croix, and I'm terribly sorry for what Robert did. He'll be whipped when Father hears he wasted an egg."

I draw in my breath and glance sharply at the girl. She speaks English, but her name and accent are unmistakably French. Hundreds of Huguenots have fled France and its papist ruler, Louis IX, since the beginning of Queen Anne's War. A few years earlier, King Louis had sent a fleet of ships to capture Charles Towne. The attack had failed, but none of Charles Towne's citizens had forgotten. Those tied to France are still viewed with suspicion. Unwilling to add to my troubles, I remain silent.

"You're bleeding," Suzanne says, dabbing beneath my nose with the cloth.

"It is nothing," I say, glancing toward the top of the line, where Strabo is pacing back and forth, cracking his whip in the air. "Please go," I whisper. "I'll get the lash if he sees you."

Suzanne presses the cloth into my hands. "Take it," she pleads. "I dyed it in Yule berries, to bring good luck." She hesitates, and then adds, "Whatever you have done, I'm sorry for your troubles."

I bite my lip at the kindness in the girl's voice. Since the deaths of my parents, I have heard only harsh words. My eyes film and I blink quickly to clear them. "I've done nothing wrong," I murmur. "A misunderstanding led me here."

"Then I shall offer double prayers for you," Suzanne says.

Before I can answer, the line moves forward and pulls me along with it. When I look up again, I see the black waters of the Ashley River sloshing against a newly built auction block set into the sand.