

Chapter 2

Noting the color of the leaves, Justin Harris whispered reassurance to his horse as the young mare picked her way down a rocky slope. It certainly was a gorgeous autumn day, and he was eager to return to his home and family. As he began to see familiar landmarks along the road, he felt the natural tension between his shoulders start to relax.

The Cherokee had been relatively peaceful for the past few years, but the French had certainly been stirring up trouble all up and down the seaboard, supplying arms and rum to the Indians in an effort to disrupt trade and settlement in the English Colonies. Any time he traveled beyond the settled region around his home, Justin felt that old tension between his shoulder blades build up, as though expecting the sharpened head of an arrow to bite in at any moment.

Now, though, with the late afternoon sun slanting through the trees and the trilling of the songbirds he knew so well ringing in his ears, he could relax. As he came to the bottom of the hardscabble slope, he could see the fresh marks of other travelers on this road. Horse droppings that looked to be from only this morning made him wonder who was traveling ahead of him, and regret that he had not met his fellow traveler on the road.

Some company other than the mare would have been a welcome break from the monotony and tension

of riding from Charles Town. It was only three days' riding, four in foul weather, but one was safer in a group. With the smell of fresh-fallen leaves warm in his nostrils, though, Justin could not hold on to his regret for long. He always relished the anticipation of the last few miles to home, and was, upon reflection, just as glad to enjoy them in solitude.

He wondered how the children were faring as malarial months set in. Every fall was a new terror for his young wife, as she worried over each shiver that the children suffered. Though their farm was somewhat up out of the bottom land where the fevers often seemed to reside, in a bad year, the pestilential fever would sweep out over the land, touching nearly every home from Charles Town to the Upcountry.

While his small farm could not yet justify a slave to help, Justin hoped to be able to afford the investment within only a few more years. The land was rich and fertile, and he was glad that the small field of tobacco he'd harvested last month had been so productive. It was a lot of work to take on without help, but the oldest boy would be big enough to at least guide the turkeys through the fields next summer, where they would feast on pests in the leaves.

His cousin outside of Charles Town had hinted at the possibility of the loan of a buck negro, but Justin had demurred for the time being, unwilling to be beholden to his wealthy relations so soon after breaking off to establish his own fortune. Jeremiah had called the slave in from the fields for Justin's inspection.

"He's a fine, strong one, that Terrance," Jeremiah had said, laughter in his voice, and his hands lying across his expansive belly. "Turn 'round for my cousin Justin, Terrance," he called out to the young man,

whose skin was as black as night.

“Bred that boy right here on the plantation, Justin. His mam was just off the boat from Guinea, but his pap is an old fellow who’s worked for HARRISES near his whole life. Mam didn’t make it through the fevers a few years ago, but Terrance here, he didn’t mind leaving the house when he got big enough for the fields. Didn’t care for my silly wife prayin’ over him all the time.”

Jeremiah raised his voice to call out to the black man. “That’ll be all, Terrance. Now get back to the fields—you’re behind on your work now.” He gave a hearty laugh and dug Justin in the ribs. “Gotta keep them negroes hopping, you know? Doesn’t do to have a blackbird sitting around, tryin’ to think up ways to get themselves into trouble.” Terrance silently turned and walked back to the fields, his stride long, but merely efficient, not overtly prideful.

Justin’s eyes narrowed in thought as he rode. Terrance did not strike him as being one to worry about, unlike some negroes he’d seen. Slaves birthed and raised on the plantation rarely were, even if their dams were fresh from Africa.

Pondering it, he could see how having Terrance on the farm could make it possible to plant a more ambitious tobacco crop the next spring. He’d have to get some more land cleared, of course, but that could keep even a strong young buck busy for months. He decided that he’d ask Elizabeth whether she was comfortable with a negro on the farm, and if she agreed, he’d swallow his pride and write to Jeremiah.

After all, if the point of establishing his own homestead was to reach the point of being independent of the Charles Town HARRISES’ wealth, how better to achieve that than by bringing in a bigger tobacco crop

next fall? Of course, making the shift from indigo planting to tobacco would be challenging for the negro, but nothing that an occasional touch of the whip couldn't help with.

He caught the first whiff of fragrant smoke from the cooking fire from his neighbor's place and sat up straighter on his mare. Digging his heels in slightly, he urged her to speed up a bit, but she needed no encouragement. Her own eagerness to return to the comfort of her familiar paddock was incentive enough for her to pick up her feet and walk more smartly.

Rounding the corner on the road as it wrapped around the hill behind his farm, he could see his simple home. One day, he hoped, he'd give Elizabeth a proper plantation home, but for the moment, she didn't seem to mind it, and the children were happy. As he rode down the slope to the house, Timothy spotted him and started running, shouting, "Papa! Papa!"

Elizabeth, hearing his excitement, emerged from the house, her face shining with her exertions in the kitchen. Justin rode up to her and swung out of his saddle, taking her into his arms for a long embrace. His son threw himself onto one of Justin's legs and wrapped his arms around it tightly, beside himself at the joy of seeing his father again. His baby daughter came to the doorway, where she solemnly regarded him, thumb stuck into her mouth. Her enormous dark eyes were like pools of ink, and after a moment, she turned and toddled back into the house.

"I am so glad to see you, Justin," Elizabeth murmured into his shoulder. "Old Thomas did come by every day, as you asked him to, and made sure that everything was taken care of around the farm, but I worry whenever you're traveling."

“I know, Elizabeth. It’s pretty safe these days, though. And I’m glad I went. Jeremiah’s really becoming quite the figure in Charles Town. He also had an interesting offer for me.” Justin outlined his thoughts on bringing Terrance to the farm, pointing out the advantages of being able to expand their tobacco crop sooner than he’d expected.

“I won’t do it, though, if you don’t like the idea of a negro on the farm, Elizabeth.”

She considered for a moment and then said, “No, I don’t think it will trouble me. I worry about what the children will make of it, but I know it’s important for us to be able to improve our situation here.”

Justin embraced his wife again. “The children will take it in their stride, once the novelty of the thing wears off. I’ll write to Jeremiah and work out the details.” He whirled around, looking at the land around his home. “I think we’ll clear that section over there for the planting, and that area past there for the growing season.”

He turned back to his wife, gesturing at the fields. “I’ll be right inside. I am famished from the ride, but I want to check on the tobacco before I come in, all right?”

“Certainly, dearest. I have a good chicken stew started, and I just need to make some biscuits. It should all be ready before sundown.”

He kissed her on the side of her head. “That sounds wonderful, dear. I won’t be long.”

Stretching his legs as he walked, Justin strode to the small structure where the tobacco hung, drying. The rich scent of the leaves, now faded from brilliant green to a deep tawny shade, filled his whole head with its heady odor—and the thought of the earnings they would bring. He’d have to hitch up the wagon and bring

them in to the government house in just a few more weeks.

The soft weight of the leaves rustled slightly as he ran his hands over them gently. It had been a good crop, with nearly perfect weather, particularly at harvest time. A long summer of careful attention had yielded nearly as perfect a result as he could have hoped for.

He reflected that he might even be able to triple his crop next year, if Terrance were industrious enough. He'd have to get a letter off to his cousin with the next post rider, though, if he were to have enough time to clear the land.

Turning to look back out over the hollow where his house nestled, Justin sighed contentedly. Everything was going to work out well, he just knew it.