

Chapter I

It was all over now. Calabar recognized the final rattle of breath from sitting by his own mother's deathbed, and he knew that his master's days were done.

Frederick Greene would never again rise from the mattress he had ordered Calabar to stuff with fresh straw earlier in the summer. The slave stood, reaching up to knead the tension out of his own shoulder, methodically thinking through what must be done next.

Mister Greene's son, a busy and prosperous tobacco farmer, must be summoned. Calabar felt the first stab of panic at that thought, as he did not trust what the younger Greene might decide to do with him, Affey, and their newborn daughter. He suppressed his fear, though, to focus on what must be done.

He ducked through the doorway of his master's bedroom, stepped out through the kitchen door and called out, "Affey! Come and help me saddle up Mister Greene's horse."

Affey appeared around the corner of the house, worry and fear written across her broad face. The baby was swaddled as usual in a sling against her chest, and she instinctively pulled her closer as she said in a quavering voice, "Is he . . . ?"

Calabar nodded solemnly. "I need to go and bring word to Master Greene. We must be ready to help him with whatever arrangements he will make for his father."

He grimaced, adding, "Master Greene . . . owns us now."

Affey's tears started in earnest now, though Calabar knew from the swirl of emotions that rampaged through his own heart that she wept not so much for their departed master as for the potential chaos that his death was sure to bring in its wake.

Calabar stepped forward and pulled her into his arms, but only for a moment. "We must be strong now, Affey. We cannot control what happens after this. We can only do what must be done. Right now, I need to ride that horse."

Affey nodded, wiping her tears away. She followed him to the stable and led the old mare out of her stall to blink lazily in the bright summer sunlight. Calabar was ready with the saddle, swinging it up onto the horse's back, and Affey wordlessly reached under the animal's belly to pass him the cinch.

He grunted in thanks and secured it, pulling it tight and waiting for the mare to exhale before tightening it completely. He ruefully remembered the only time he'd fallen for the horse's trick, and remembered, too the harsh words Mister Greene had lavished on him.

The master had returned, half an hour after the mare had ambled in, and Calabar was thankful that the man had had the long walk home to calm down a bit. If it had happened closer by, Calabar was reasonably sure that Mister Greene would have whipped him for his mistake.

As it was, his master had required Calabar to sweep and scrub the entirety of the stable until it gleamed, giving the slave no rest until the job was done. Calabar remembered few nights when he had been as grateful to fall into his bed of straw as that one, and even the full moon – high in the sky by the time he'd finished the job – could not keep him awake.

Shaking his head to dismiss the memory, Calabar slipped the bridle over the horse's head and slipped the bit between her teeth. He placed his foot into the stirrup as he'd seen Mister Greene do so many times, and attempted to swing himself up onto her back. He succeeded only in kicking her in the hindquarters, and she shied away, giving him a baleful glance over her shoulder.

Affey was struggling to keep a smile off her face, her lips pressed together in firm and serious determination, though her eyes told a wholly different story. Calabar sighed and said, "Fetch me that stool, if you could."

Stepping up onto the short stool, he tried again, and succeeded in getting himself up onto the saddle, albeit without his legs straddling the animal. Gracelessly, he scrambled into a seated position and worked his other foot into the stirrup.

Affey looked up at him. "Are you sure you should ride, and not just walk?"

He sighed, picking the reins up as he'd seen Mister Greene do on many occasions. "I may wind up walking. I should try to get there quick as I can, though."

He pulled the reins to one side, urging the horse to turn. She bent her neck in the direction he was pulling, but did not move her feet at all. He pulled harder, and the horse tossed her head and then started back for her stable, carrying Calabar along helplessly.

Affey followed, her expression no longer concealing mirth, but instead sharing in Calabar's obvious frustration. "Should I lead her back out?"

He shook his head in resignation. "I will just walk," he said, pulling his foot out of the stirrup and swinging it over the mare's back to jump down. "Can you remove the tack?" He got his other

foot free of its stirrup and slid down to the ground.

She nodded and bent to start loosening the saddle, protecting the baby's head with one hand as she did so.

“Thank you, Affey. I had best set out. I will make up what time I can.” He sighed again, grimacing. “I’ll tell Shampee on my way. He will gather the others.”

With no more than a quick glance back, Calabar set out down the road from the big house, between the fields grown waist-high on both sides of the road with the bushy indigo plants that had made Mister Greene so prosperous in life.

As he ran, he could hear the scream of a locust and smelled the damp earth of the fields. He breathed in deeply, glad that it was not yet harvest season – once the slaves began processing the indigo, the reek of the fermenting leaves would overpower everything else as far as the eye could see.

He approached the three-tiered processing vats and found Shampee, the plantation's slave driver, fetching water to bring to the crew working the field beyond the structure. He slowed to a walk, mastering his breath so that he could speak to the other slave.

Shampee looked up at Calabar's approach, concern clear in his expression. Mister Greene had been ill since the prior evening, and his condition had been a topic of conversation and speculation in the slave quarters far past the setting of the sun.

Calabar nodded in greeting to Shampee and said simply, “Mister Greene is dead. I'm going to go tell Master Greene. He will need to make arrangements.”

Shampee's mouth fell open and, shaking his head slowly, he said, “Thought for sure that he was gonna pull through.” His

gravely voice concealed any grief he was feeling, but he grimaced, betraying his emotions. “And just before the harvest, too.”

Looking around at the indigo in the fields, Calabar agreed, “It’s going to be a good crop, too. Shame Mister Greene didn’t see it come in.”

He motioned with his head back up the road. “I had best be off, Shampee. You gather the others and wait for Master Greene.”

Shampee nodded. “Gonna be some changes here.” He grimaced again and turned toward the fields, his steps mechanical.

Calabar returned to the road and followed the path to Master Green’s plantation. He’d accompanied Mister Greene to his son’s home several times, and knew the way well enough. It was a fair stretch, though, and by the time the large, well-kept house came into view, the sun was dipping visibly from its noontime zenith, casting lengthening shadows across the road.

He’d seen nobody else on the road – and a good thing, too, as he did not fancy being picked up as a runaway – but now, one of Master Greene’s slaves spotted him and waved in greeting. Calabar dropped to a slow walk, his legs burning, and returned the wave.

The other man – an older, stooped slave whose name Calabar could not recall – hurried to him, asking, “Are you all right?”

Between breaths, Calabar puffed out, “I am fine, but I must speak to your master without delay.”

Giving Calabar a quizzical look, the older man said, “He is in the house. I will take you.”

They found Master Greene sitting at a large table, papers spread out before him in orderly piles. His face was broad and his characteristic shrewd expression gave way to a frown as he looked up to find Calabar standing before him.

“What brings you here, and in such a lather, boy?”

“I be so sorry, Master Greene. I got to tell you that your father done died.”

Greene blinked quickly, his face registering shock, and he asked, “What? How? I just saw him a fortnight ago, and he was hale and hearty.”

Calabar bowed his head, replying carefully, “He took ill quick at night, sir. He be weaker, weaker all night, then died just a while ago.”

Greene cast his eyes downward toward his desk for a long moment before he replied, “This is an unlooked-for turn.” He frowned again, saying almost more to himself than to Calabar, “What in the name of heaven am I going to do with an indigo plantation?”

Calabar kept his expression steady, but the fear that had burned in his gut ever since he saw Mister Greene’s clammy, slack face by the light of the rising sun now roared into a blaze.

The questions came unbidden to his mind – would the slaves be sold, scattered like chaff in the wind? What would become of Affey and the baby? Could he persuade a new master to buy the three of them together? The routine of life on the indigo plantation was grueling, but it was familiar, and the prospect of having it snatched away by an untimely and sudden shift of fortune shook him to his core.

He realized that Master Greene was again gazing up at him, a thoughtful frown on his face. Greene called out to the older slave, who still stood behind Calabar in the doorway, “Albert, get the horses hitched to the cart, and make it fast.”

Looking back at Calabar, he said, “I suppose you ran all the

way here, then? Very well, you may ride to my father's plantation with me." He wrinkled his nose, adding, "You will sit on the back, however."