

## Chapter 1 of The Indentured Heart Copyright © by Barbara Raffin.

Spring 1770

Almost too late, Royce Devlin saw the thread-like creature wriggling through the dark liquid in the ladle he lifted toward his lips. With a curse, he flung the inky water onto the deck of the gunship turned merchantman.

Foul! All fouled! First spider's nest infested biscuits and he'd stopped eating, now water he could no longer drink.

He stormed past the ventilation gratings in the main deck and vaulted up the ladder onto the forecastle of the pendulous Elizabethan style vessel. Gripping the railing above the bowsprit that jutted like a finger pointing accusation at the land, he growled his outrage.

"Damn my ill fate! Damn the London court that decreed me guilty! And damn the judge who condemned me into indentureship!"

Eleven years he'd worked his way from cabin boy to first mate. Five more years he'd captained the vessel he'd earned with his own sweat and blood. By end of shipping season last, he'd have had all he needed to buy himself an English estate and attract a quality wife to bear him sons. He'd have proven his success. Then, with one shortsighted edict, the cumbersome English judicial system had stripped him of his property and banished him to his own personal hell.

Paint flaked from the railing beneath the clench of Royce's hands as he faced his immediate future, the God-awful Americas. Half of his life he had labored to escape these coastal waters. Now he was back as penniless as the day he'd first run from them.

The cabin door below the quarterdeck banged open and twittering laughter rang out across the decks. Though Royce had provided the foppish captain a gentleman's company during the duller hours asea, he'd found nothing in the man to respect. Not because the fop had been easily persuaded to gamble with a man who had nothing to bet save his labor against the control of accepting or rejecting offers on his indentureship. Not because the captain liked his drink strong and often. Royce added Captain Smythe to the list of those he damned, because Smythe ill fed his human cargo and refused to freshen their drinking water even after two weeks moored in the Maryland harbor.

Royce eyed the indentured souls languishing on the lower deck. He'd brought them what extras he could off of Smythe's table once the captain was in his cups. Now, watching them, he wondered if he'd only prolonged their misery. They were ill and had been passed over because of it.

Meanwhile, he was healthy and had rejected many a respectable offer. Maybe the free choice he'd won off of Captain Smythe hadn't turned out to be such a privilege after all.

On the lower deck, the captain pressed a hankie to his nostrils as he lead his guest past the ripening, human cargo. Royce flared his nostrils, inhaling the stench of human refuse rising from the head beneath the bowsprit. The lordly classes hadn't had to reduce him to merchandise for him to learn the common man's reality. Long before the sea offered him an avenue to success, Royce Devlin had known the foulness of

bondage.

"Blast me if I'll do the full fourteen year sentence."

He slapped the palms of his hands against the rail above the bowsprit, spun, and paced the forecastle like a caged tiger. Worrying about a handful of unfortunates who hadn't the constitution to see them through life's trials wasn't helping him gain his freedom. He needed off this ship, and he needed a position that would keep him close to the coast. It was his only means of escape. Unless...

Royce paused and lifted his face toward the mouth of the Severn River where it drained into the Chesapeake. A letter would free him. One letter.

"No!" The word tore from deep inside of him like a curse, and he balled his hands into fists at his sides. "No letter. By all that is holy, I swore my independence from her. There are other ways to make myself once again a free man. My own man!"

"Sink me," crowed an urbane, male voice from the lower deck where Royce had last seen the Cockney girl, Sarah. "What's a nubile creature like you doing on a vessel such as this?"

With lethal calm, Royce turned toward the rail separating the forecastle from the lower, open deck. Through the windblown strands of her chocolate brown hair, Sarah puckered back at the stranger beside Captain Smythe. "Waitin' on a man the likes of you no doubt, guv'nor."

Royce scowled at the man paused in front of the girl whose head he'd scrubbed free of lice just the day before. He didn't need the dandy's fine linen breeches nor waistcoat of the most fashionable length to recognize him as the sort who would take undo advantage of a common girl. To recognize him as the same sort who'd charge a man and cost him his hard-earned freedom.

Royce took one measured step away from the seaward rail, his gaze riveted to the dandy leering down the front of Sarah's loose-fitting bodice. Men like that used girls like Sarah then cast them aside when done with them. Men like the one salivating over the womanly assets of an overeager girl considered themselves to be above the law.

Men like him controlled the dais of bewigged judges that had decreed Royce guilty and sentenced him to virtual slavery. The colonies were not without their class system, not as long as there were *gentleman* planters who emulated England's aristocracy. Royce knew. He'd grown up among their likes.

"I'd make you a good parlor maid, guv'nor, that I would."

"But I've need only of an upstairs maid," purred the planter silkily.

"I've tucked in me share of bed linens," she cooed back.

In one, long stride, Royce brought himself to the rail behind Sarah. He caught the planter's eye, held it with his own unrelenting gaze.

*What worse could your system do to me should I find it necessary to lay a hand upon you, Planter?*

The dandy stiffened back as though Royce's thought had been etched in his glare, and the man sputtered in the captain's direction, "It seems you've nothing here I can use."

The planter hurried to the side of the ship where his launch was moored. Captain Smythe started after him. The dandy skidded a leg over the rail of the lower deck, waved off Smythe, and dropped out of sight. Sarah threw herself against the rail and cried out, "I'd clean your bedchambers good, I would."

The thump of an oar against the merchantman's wooden hull echoed up off the water. Sarah's voice trailed, "Dustin's dustin'. . . upstairs or down."

Captain Smythe wheeled about, pursed his thin lips, and jabbed a stubby finger at Royce. "Soul drivers are gonna get you along with the whole sorry lot. And they'll drive you so far inland, Devlin, you'll never again breathe salt air."

Smythe's words didn't threaten. They promised. Royce had crisscrossed too many seas not to recognize when a captain, even one more merchant than seafarer, had grown tired of being anchored in one place.

As the rotund captain disappeared below decks, a shout rang up from the departing launch. "Watch as you go, boy."

A stunted form capped by a sweat stained hat grabbed the sides of the dory in which he rode as it bobbed wildly in the launch's wake. No seaman, that one, Royce judged.

No boy either, judging by the brackish stream of tobacco juice he spat after the launch and the quality of his curse. "The bloody pox on ya."

The dory smacked into the side of the merchantman below where Sarah stood. She skittered back, to the far side of the open deck. The new arrival dropped over the rail like a shadow. His piggy eyes scanned the open decks.

"Motley bunch," he grumbled to no one in particular. "Told her would be too late. Told her they'd be picked over. Buy slaves, I tell her. No need breakin' no sweat rowin' from ship to ship to look over slaves. They bring them to shore. Black as midnight and simple as sin, can't lose 'em in a crowd. Not like bloody English indentureds what blend in like fleas on a dog."

The hair at the nape of Royce's neck bristled. "Overseer." The word hissed like an oath from his lips. "No better than gaolers. No better than a lying gentleman."

The overseer kicked the foot of an indentured man dozing with his back to the bulwark. The man barely stirred. Curling a lip, the overseer moved on. Halfway along the deck, he hesitated before another squatted with his back to the main mast. He toed the man in the ribs. The man toppled onto his side, his hat popping from his head, exposing open staring eyes.

Royce winced. A woman screamed. A child wailed. The overseer cackled. "Looks to be ya lost another of ya."

Then he scanned the haunted faces worrying over the dead man upon the deck and snorted. "Which of ya's gonna be next, eh?"

"Shut up," bawled a scrawny lad, lunging for the visitor.

Easily, the overseer backhanded the boy aside.

A taller, broader lad balled his fists in front of his face. "You won't put me to the deck so easy, ya little runt!"

The overseer wheeled about. "What'd you call me, boy?"

The youth dropped his fists a bit, cocked his chin, and taunted, "Runt. Runt. runty little man."

Snickers waffled through the crowd. Royce studied the lad. He had meat on his bones in spite of the ocean crossing, in spite of a bout of the flux. He was also a good head taller than the overseer. He had a chance in a fair fight.

Without raising his fists, the overseer came at the boy. The boy swung. The overseer ducked. Quicker than Royce could shout warning, a metal blade glinted in the

man's hand, and he jabbed its thick handle into the boy's belly, doubling the lad over. Turning toward the crowd, the overseer waved the long blade. "Who's next?"

No one answered.

The overseer crowed. "Now which of ya sorry lot am I gonna save from this rotting tub? Which of ya whites what come sellin' yerselves like slaves does Jubal Toombs save today?"

Uneasily the people pressed back against the rail. Toombs strutted before them, his eyes roving, theirs glancing away. He stopped in front of Sarah. His evil gaze flicked from her bosom to her face, as he rumbled menacingly, "Be it you, sweet thing?"

She shrank from his reaching hand. Toombs caught her by the upper arm and jerked her close. "Yer in no position ta be actin' so high-and-mighty, girly."

"Unhand her," growled Royce.

The overseer started, his grip loosening. Sarah bolted for the higher deck where Royce stood. Craning his neck in Royce's direction, the wretch flipped one corner of his coat aside, displaying the menace of his over-sized knife like a small, cornered cur baring his fangs. "Be you a mate on this tub?"

"What business is it of yours to ask?" Royce demanded, though he already knew why the overseer visited a ship with a cargo of indentured souls.

"'Tis the business of one come to buy."

Sarah clutched Royce's arm. "You can't let him take me!"

"I've no say in the matter, Sarah."

Toombs spread his stubby hands in the air, his thin lips slanting wryly. "Surely yer no part of this cargo?"

Royce didn't answer.

Toombs howled. "Now, how'd a fine gentleman the likes of you get himself indentured?"

Royce remained silent. The laughter died on Toombs' tongue. His glittery gaze shifted from Royce to the clinging Sarah. "She ain't yours."

"I am," Sarah half sobbed, gripping Royce's arm tighter.

Toombs snorted. "You two, a couple?"

"We are," she sputtered. In a lowered voice for Royce's ears, she pleaded, "If 'e thinks I'm alone, Royce, 'e'll buy up me papers. I know 'e will. Please Royce."

Toombs nodded toward shore. "A mate off this ship takin' his leave at the White Horse Inn told me all that's left of this vessel's cargo is singles but for one couple. You sayin' yer the one bound set?"

Royce glanced at the dead man on the main deck in the arms of his weeping widow. Sarah's fingers tightened around Royce's forearm. "Please, Royce."

He shouldn't have scared off her planter. That one would have used her but likely not have abused her. Figuring he owed Sarah, Royce nodded.

Toombs grumbled and slunk off toward the quarterdeck below which were the officers' quarters. If Toombs called up the captain, he'd learn he and Sarah were no couple.

Toombs pounded on the wall of the companionway. Smythe's head and shoulders emerged from the stairwell, the white hankie fluttering beneath his nostrils. Toombs gestured toward the forecabin as he spoke. Smythe glared at Royce when he answered, leaving no doubt that the truth was out.

Sarah's fingers dug into Royce's forearm. She too understood that their lie had failed to save her.

Then, with a final sneer in their direction, Toombs lumbered across the main deck to the rope ladder, climbed over the rail, and dropped out of sight. Sarah let go of Royce and dashed to the port-facing side of the forecastle. "Cap'n Smythe had to have told 'im I was a single. Do you think he refused to sell me papers to so hateful a man, do you Royce?"

Royce joined her at the rail. "I doubt Captain Smythe has that generous a spirit." *Not with the soul drivers circling closer daily with their meager lot prices.*

For the first time, Royce considered the possibility that Toombs had been looking for a couple, that his and Sarah's charade had invited the very attention they'd meant to avoid. The hair at the nape of Royce's neck prickled as he watched Toombs row away from the merchantman.

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Megan McCall drummed her fingertips against the edge of the carriage seat. She'd caught scarcely a glimpse of Toombs since he'd climbed aboard the merchantman. And she didn't trust the man any further than she could see him. Damnation. If she hadn't made her own inquiries at the White Horse Inn about available indentureships, Toombs would have had her already packed aboard Peyton's schooner awaiting a proper wind to blow them out of the harbor.

Nor should she have sent Toombs about the shipyards on his own these past days. She should have hired a boy to go about with him. A youth she could have intimidated into truth telling. Then she'd have known if Toombs did his job properly or not.

"Penny wise and pound foolish," she muttered. "And weary of arguing with slackers."

A salty breeze rattled the sleek phaeton and slipped beneath its black hood. Megan lifted her face into the mist and her impatient fingers stilled against the seat cushion. Before her, the topgallant of the merchantman's main mast bobbed against a backdrop of blue sky and spotty, white clouds. In her ears echoed the slap of waves against wooden hull.

Megan inhaled the briny air and, for an instant, Toombs and every other worry plaguing her scattered with the wind. For an instant, she felt the weight of her father's arm once more around her shoulders. She heard his sandpapery voice name the parts of a ship for her as he had since before she could walk.

She even felt the sway of a deck beneath her feet.

Then the dappled gray harnessed to the phaeton stomped and the buggy shook, reminding Megan where she was and why. Anger flared through her. The pleasures of a ship's deck were hers to enjoy no more, not since the sea had taken her father from her.

Not since a man of impeccable lineage had taken everything else.

"By the blood of God, I swear I'll be free of dependence on any man by summer's end."

A small boat slipping from the shadow of the merchantman snagged her attention. Fitting a spyglass to her eye, Megan focused on the approaching dory. Toombs was alone.

Curse that man his dilly-dallying. Given all his complaint about rowing out to the ships, given all the excuses he'd delivered to her instead of an indentured couple, she

should have seen sooner that Toombs wasted her time. But she was tired. She was tired of maneuvering her buggy between her cheap waterfront room and the tightfisted Maryland banks. She was tired of depending on an unreliable overseer and overworked maid.

She was tired of her own limitations.

Lowering the spyglass in one hand, Megan smacked the seat cushion beside her hip with the other. The gray horse whinnied.

"Easy, girl. 'Tis myself I'm lashing out at."

The gray shook her head, rattling the harnessing.

"And Toombs," she muttered. "Curse myself for accepting even one of his excuses. Curse him and his tales of indentured contracts already bought up, of sickly or pricey pairs, or of couples who come with a brood of children."

The filly chewed at the bit in her mouth.

"'Tis naught but complaint you hear from me these days, hey my Gray Girl?"

The filly nickered softly.

"Our circumstances will improve. They must!"

Megan refitted the spyglass to her eye and sighted on the couple she'd spotted earlier at the forecastle rail. Toombs couldn't call either of them frail, though the woman was nearly as pale as the man was hale; and her clothes did hang a bit on her frame.

Megan sighed. "Sea crossings do take their toll."

As for dispelling Toombs' brood of children excuse, the wife looked to be well shy of twenty. The two of them couldn't have begot too many offspring yet. How much could a few, small children eat anyway?

Perhaps the noise of little ones about Hillhouse would be good for the spirit of the old place. Certainly her own mood could use some lifting.

The breeze caught the loose folds of the man's white shirt, blousing the fabric like a sail from his broad shoulders to his lean waist. Any sons he sired would be strapping, able-bodied lads in a few years. And attract every craftsman's daughter up and down the Chesapeake, if they likewise inherited the thick, auburn hair ruffling about their father's shoulders.

And if they favored the mother? They'd best hope to have gained at least the benefit of their father's straight, Anglican nose. Or did she detect a French influence in the profile he lifted toward the mouth of the bay? By any measure, the wife was not the husband's match.

But in what way? Maturity? There was an apparent age difference.

Many a man married a younger woman, especially if he lived a hard enough life to wear out more than one wife. Not that the man with the auburn hair whipping back from his high, burnished brow showed any sign of hard living. Though the lean muscles detailed by a white shirt plastered against arms and chest by a fickle wind suggested the man was no stranger to physical labor.

Maybe what didn't match-up were their postures. Her shoulders had a common slouch to them. His were square. She sprawled her elbows along the rail and propped her face between her hands, oblivious to how much her immodest bodice exposed. He stood straight. Already, her young body slumped with resignation while his was stiff with an inbred indignation.

Differing economic backgrounds, then, she decided. "No difference now that they've

been reduced to the desperate state of indentureship together."

Still, the disparities between the man and woman nagged Megan. They couldn't have been together long. The cut of their clothes didn't match. Her chemise was of a simple, working-class style and made of inexpensive cloth. His seen-better-days, tan breeches embraced muscled thighs as though they'd been tailor made to fit.

"No padding beneath his patched stockings, I'd wager," she murmured wistfully. "I could have well used a man like him."

The slab ladder nailed to the piling near where Megan had parked her buggy creaked. The filly stomped and blew. The rank odor of old sweat curled through Megan's nostrils. Lowering the glass into the black folds of her skirt, she watched Toombs haul himself up onto the wharf.

"Ain't none worth the havin' on that one either, mum," he reported as he righted himself before her.

"What of that pair on the forecastle deck, Mr. Toombs?"

"They ain't for you."

"Has their contract been bought up?"

"No."

"Have they a brood of children I can ill afford to feed?"

"No, but--"

"Let me guess. They're a pricey pair."

"He'd be a costly one, him bein' a long timer out of Newgate Prison. Fourteen years his sentence."

"Convicts come cheap," she snapped. "It's one of the reasons I've brought us here, Mr. Toombs. Maryland still allows convict indentureships into the colonies."

"But--"

"Was *his* a violent crime?"

Toombs' lips twisted, their corners twisting with mean pleasure. Too weary to listen to any nasty tale Toombs would delight in telling, Megan warned, "And don't lie to me this time, Toombs. I'll stay in Maryland for as many days as it takes to find a couple with strong backs. Don't think I won't pass up the free passage of Mr. Lyttle's vessel."

She leaned from the waist toward Toombs. "I can always save myself a coin or two by not buying you passage home."

The sneer faded from Toombs' mouth and he grumbled.

Megan straightened. "Be assured, I will drive you to meet each newly arrived ship myself and wait as I have this morning to make sure you do indeed visit them. So, I ask you again, Mr. Toombs. Was his a violent crime?"

"None that they tell me, mum."

"Fine then," she leveled, ignoring Toombs' contemptuous glare and raising her arm and pointing. "I'll have them!"

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"Ooooh lawdy," chirped Sarah. "Loo' at that fine buggy. Must be from one o' them grand plantations. Big as castles, I 'ear they are and the servant's livin' grand as the masters. Gor, to have me papers bought up by someone the likes of that."

Royce sighted off the tilt of Sarah's chin. The light carriage was black and hooded, like those physicians drove...or ladies. Beside the phaeton stood Jubal Toombs.

Royce grimaced. As usual, Sarah saw only what she wanted to see. While he saw

the raw reality of a black-sleeved arm lifting from beneath the black hood of the phaeton and pointing them out. Royce shivered.

Instinct warned him against accepting the employment of the person who belonged to that arm. There may yet be time for another offer.

Then he caught sight of two familiar men plodding the planks, they too pointing out the merchantman. They'd been aboard a week ago, looking to buy. But individual indentures were still selling well, the captain not yet ready to unload the lot of his human cargo at soul drivers' prices.

But that had been then. The remaining indentureds had since grown more ill with their weariness and the captain restless for a fresh cargo. Royce drew a long breath. Time to be choosy had just run out.