

"I want mommy to be well." Henry spoke in a barely audible tone of voice now. He looked into Hannah's eyes. For once he was pleading and not demanding. "I don't need a baby brother or sister. They're hurting mommy. Tell them to go away, Hannie." He turned and closed his eyes.

Hannah smiled down at the boy. "Well, you just listen really carefully for its cry. You will hear it soon." She stroked his head once more and left the room. Picking up the stack of towels that she had placed on the mahogany table outside in the spacious hallway, Hannah disappeared into the room next door.

Its massive double doors marked the center of the hallway. To each side, six other handcrafted single doors led to other bedrooms and guestrooms on the floor. Facing the hall at one end a seventh door opened to Hannah's suite, while on the opposite end stairs cascaded from the floor in a pleasing arc.

Hannah entered her cousin and mistress's lavishly furnished and decorated bedroom. An active calm greeted her. On the canopy bed along the sidewall, a young woman was comforted by a stately looking lady with gray hair tied into a bun at the back of her head and held carefully in place by small diamond-studded combs on each side of her head. A host of candles provided volumes of light to the people. The drapes of all windows were pulled shut except for the central window where the reflection of the flickering candles looked back into the room. "You must be brave for only a little while longer, Meredith," the older woman said in a firm but kind voice. "The baby will be here soon." She smiled at the younger woman whose labor pains were etched in her face from hours of suffering with a difficult birth.

Meredith clutched her mother-in-law's hand. "Thank you, Mother Carstairs," the young woman whispered. "This one is testing me severely." Her words were cut short by another contraction. Pain contorted her beautiful face. Her fingers dug into the hand that held hers.

"All right, Love, once more really hard," the midwife shouted. "Now hard, Dearie, go hard!" Another painful cry invaded the floors of the house, and a minute later the cry of a baby, only faintly heard in the rooms on either side of the master bedroom, brought smiles of relief to the faces of the five women in the room. "Small wonder, Love," the midwife sighed. "You have a strapping young man here. The likes of this kind don't birth easily. I dare say he'll go better than ten pounds, Love." She motioned to the servant girl who was standing quietly near the dresser where the washbasin stood. "Let's clean this little rascal up a bit so that his mother can cuddle him. He'll be hungry too, I dare say." Moments later a bundle kicking inside a warm, white blanket was placed into the arms of an exhausted but beaming and eagerly waiting Meredith.

Henry had fallen asleep soon after Hannah's departure. While he had stirred in his sleep at his mother's last cries, he did not wake and did not hear his brother's greeting. On the other side of Henry's room Melissa, the younger Carstairs' oldest child, a sweet, gentle nine-year-old girl had knelt beside her bed resting her head on the bedding. Melissa had been praying for her mother and the baby whose coming her parents had told her much about. She had winced at each of her mother's cries and prayed more fervently for some moments after each painful outcry. When she heard the baby's voice, she began to smile. She tiptoed to her bedroom door to hear better and listened silently for several minutes until her mother's door opened and her grandmother stepped from the room framed in the candles' light behind her.

Elizabeth Carstairs' sharp eyes caught the child's door closing slowly. She stepped to it, knocked once, and opened the door quickly. "Come here child!" she said gently but with evident authority. Melissa stepped from the darkness of her room into the light cast by the one Aladdin lamp lit in the hallway. "Are mother and the baby well, grandmother?" she whispered. "Please."

"They are both, Lissa. You must not worry yourself. Here, let me tuck you in. You must not fret anymore, but go to sleep now child. Tomorrow morning, you will be able to see your mother and baby brother for a tiny moment." She covered the child with the feather quilt, kissed Melissa on the forehead, and without another word turned and left the room, carefully and softly closing the door behind her.

Downstairs in the study, Samuel Carstairs had become increasingly uneasy as the night wore on. Each time when his wife's pain penetrated the walls of the house, he stopped his pacing as if gripped by unseen hands. The last cry was longer, laden with more painful energy. "Poor Meredith," he whispered to himself. "This little one is giving her more hurt than Henry did."

"Did you say something?" the voice from the tall armchair silenced Samuel and broke his concentration.

"I was just saying I hope Meredith is all right. She has been in labor for a long time with this child. She is the sun and stars in our world. I hate it when she suffers."

There was a moment of silence. Rising from the chair in front of the fireplace, a gentleman in an elegant, red-brown housecoat turned toward the pacing Samuel. "Meredith is strong, son. She has a superior will. This child that she had wanted to give you so much, that will be precious to you both, has some objections to this world. Now that you are to be with us most of the time, you will be able to watch the youngster grow from day to day and help shape its character. With Melissa and Henry, you missed months at a stretch of their growing. You cannot recapture their childhood years, but you can guide and spoil this one through the years." The speaker was Henry Carstairs III. He was a tall man with strong facial features and snow-white hair. In spite of it, he looked younger than the sixty-eight years of living he had behind him. Before he could continue to try to allay his son's fears, a gentle knock was heard at the door, and Elizabeth, his wife, entered. Her smile told the men what they had hoped to hear for some hours. Her words, "You have a strapping, second son, Samuel, and we have a beautiful third grandchild, Henry," was welcome news to both men.

"How is Meredith?" Samuel pressed his mother for an answer.

"She is very happy the child is here, I'm sure. She had to be very brave but is resting happily now with the child in her arms. Go see for yourself. Meredith was asking for you when I left her. "

The church at Five Oaks, like that of churches of many rural parts of the country, was a bastion of history for the local people and those who traveled through the area. Built in 1411, it had witnessed the coming and going of generation after generation for more than four centuries. In its confines were recorded the events that touched all people of the township, local occurrences and national decisions made far from Five Oaks.

The names, dates, and epitaphs on each gravestone in the cemetery over which the church stood guard were silent witnesses to the township's story, meticulously chiseled into the counties rock by those who were left behind to pass on the legacies of the departed. The church itself, with its tall steeple, was a massive building constructed from gray massive pieces of rock hewn from the same quarry from which the gravestones came. The rows of stained glass windows, arranged symmetrically around the building were massive too. As did the tops of the doors, the windows rose like praying hands toward the sky. From the top of the steeple, a massive bell had tolled for the coming and going of people for four hundred ten years.

Inside the church the history of the world was depicted on pictures in the massive Bible displayed on the main altar at the front of the church. Large, exquisite paintings seen on the ceiling also told the story of the Bible in beautiful color. High above the straight rows of massive pews, crafted from local oak wood and polished by more than four centuries of posteriors that had occupied them through joy and sorrow, the paintings were constant reminders of the existence of heavenly realms. At the front of the interior of the cathedral the main altar was set into an alcove. It took up the center half of the width of the building and was raised on a richly carpeted platform three steps above the main floor. The symbol of the cross was there. It was also prominent on pictures, statues, and the rest of the décor of the sanctuary.

On this early April Easter, the church bell had tolled twice. The first call had been to gather the flock for the morning service, a morning that had dawned with a glorious sunrise. At the end of the service, it tolled once more in celebration, announcing the christening of young Benjamin Carstairs, newly born less than a month earlier. Benjamin lay comfortably and content in a rich, white bundle of blankets draped over his mother's arms. Meredith Carstairs, beautiful in face and figure, had regained the rose of her complexion. Her eyes focused lovingly on the face of her sleeping baby. They sparkled, like black diamonds, with life and love. Her smile was winning. The tips of her black, beautiful curls touched her shoulders. She was of more than average height and carried herself gracefully and with confidence. She was adored by her family and loved by the people of Five Oaks for her generosity and kindness to them and for her unfailing presence among the people in times of trouble. At thirty-two, she was a picture of beauty and grace, at once gentle and strong of will and faith.

Throughout Five Oaks, her name was spoken with reverence. Meredith could stay with most men on horseback. It was rumored throughout the county that at twenty she could drive considerable fear into her male acquaintances who were game enough to test her with sword and pistol. But the picture before the landowners of the county, Hawking Manor's gentry, the tenants and the villagers who sat hushed in the pews of St. James, as witnesses to the youngest Carstairs baptism, was one of a loving mother and wife.

Hanging on to Meredith's hand on one side stood Henry. His face bore strong resemblances to his mother. He stood unsmiling. His eyes pierced through the vicar who administered the baptismal rites. Samuel Carstairs stood on the other side. He had placed one arm around his wife's waist. He looked proud and

strong, every bit the soldier he was. His blue eyes and smile, like those of his beloved wife, were fixed on the bundle that held his offspring. Samuel was tall, blond, and handsome, a quiet, yet confident man. Others admired him for his courage and strong principles. In his hand to his right rested his daughter's hand. Melissa's face beamed. She was a pretty child, resembling her father in face and color of hair. Her large blue eyes smiled at the world like the sun after a dark, cold night. Her face radiated unconditional love for her family. The baby already had felt her affection on as many occasions as Melissa had opportunities to spend time with the infant. When the vicar pronounced his name as Benjamin Andrew Franklin Carstairs, for the entire congregation to hear, she could hardly contain her joy.

Standing at the altar with Samuel and his family were his parents, Elizabeth and Henry, their oldest son Andrew, Samuel's brother, and Hannah Cardinal, Lady Meredith's cousin. She stood by Henry whose left hand was clasped in hers. And so Benjamin Andrew Franklin, sleeping through the entire ceremony, made his first appearance to the folks at Five Oaks.

Unnoticed by the Carstairs, some in the congregation raised their eyebrows at the announcement of one of the newborn Carstairs' godparents. Andrew, Samuel's brother, was held to be simple by many at Five Oaks. When people at Five Oaks spoke of him, they referred to him with pity. In taverns in the area and at gatherings where the Carstairs' clan was absent, it was said that Andrew had met with some horrendous experience in the New World that had robbed him of some of his faculties, although the people had never heard the particulars of such an experience.

Andrew was thirty-eight years old and exceedingly handsome. He lived as a recluse in the forest, which he tended for his family. Seldom was he seen in the village. When he did make an occasional appearance, some wild animals sometimes followed him like dogs might follow their master. On some visits he was heard speaking to the animals as if they were human companions. Children flocked around him. He knew the children all by name, but most adults regarded him with apprehension and pity. For Andrew, his nephew's christening was a defining moment. The baby would bare his name. Meredith had wanted him to be one of the boy's godparents. He was also to be, in part, involved with the newborn's education. Andrew smiled as he thought of how the baby had surveyed him and how young Benjamin enjoyed the attention and affection he gave him when he had held him occasionally at Meredith's invitation at Hawking Manor during the past few days. The little one also evoked memories in him of a time years past.

Hannah Cardinal, Lady Meredith's cousin and confidant and the children's governess, was the second godparent. She watched with interest. Hannah was nineteen. Although most young men in her circle did not describe her face as beautiful, she was attractive. It was her smile and soft voice that turned the heads and touched the hearts of men and women alike. In physique she was gorgeous and graceful. In spite of having experienced a good deal of pain as a youth, she had kept a sunny disposition. Hannah had been fifteen when her parents, who had taken part in a tiger hunt in India, met with a fatal accident. At the time, she was at the boarding school to which her parents had sent her a year earlier. The news of their death reached her there. It was Meredith who came to her side during those dark days and with whom she would spend her Christmas and other holidays from then on.

Hannah's brother, nine years her senior, was to assume the management of their parents' estate, but he had neither the knowledge nor the inclination to take charge of the business. He made two decisions on behalf of his parents before preparing to pursue his dream of entering the priesthood. The first was that Hannah should continue her studies at the school their parents had chosen. The last one entrusted the management of the estate to the Carstairs. Hannah was a brilliant student, gifted in the study of the language and of music. By the time she had left the private school, she skillfully played several musical instruments. She was also an accomplished singer with a beautiful soprano voice. In addition, her instructors found her to have a natural ability to teach, to win the trust of others, and to have a good deal of common sense. At seventeen, she had finished her studies. It was with a great deal of joy that she had accepted, shortly thereafter, Meredith's invitation to live at Hawking Manor as her confidant and the children's governess.

While most in the congregation looked on happily at the christening, there were tears in the eyes of Lady Lydia Holbrook. Her heart was heavy, for the child she desperately wished to have had eluded her. Lydia had married the widower Anthony Holbrook, a stately man, thirty-four years her senior. For the seven years of their marriage, they had tried and prayed for offspring, but all their efforts had remained fruitless.

Lady Holbrook looked at Meredith, her friend, and the baby she held. She regarded her friend with affection and envy. At thirty-three, Lydia had become fearful that she would never experience the joy of holding her own child. She had not come to accept that she was unable to bear children, but she knew that some in the Holbrook family had begun to whisper that she was unwilling or incapable to do her part to continue the Holbrook line. "If only they knew how much I'd love to have a son for Anthony," she thought when she came to know what the whispers meant.

She wanted a child not just for her own sake, but also for her husband's whose first wife, according to the Holbrook family, was barren. Anthony had, in recent months, found it increasingly more difficult to do his part in the procedure. Lydia knew that Anthony loved her dearly, even though she had agreed to marry him only after experiencing disappointment in a relationship she had hoped would lead her to the altar. It was that circumstance that made Lydia feel it to be her duty and obligation to give her husband the child for which he had waited a lifetime. So it was that at the sight of the bundle in Meredith's arms her longing turned to tears.

Percy Millborough, a distant neighbor, sat with his wife and daughters at the back of the church. His thoughts were not kindly disposed toward the Carstairs. All of his troubles in life, he was convinced, lay at the feet of Henry Carstairs III. Percy hated the Carstairs family because the elder of that clan had robbed him of his father in a duel thirty-one years earlier when he himself was a youth most in need of the wisdom of a father.

As painful to Percy was the thought that the woman he married was a Carstairs, a distant niece of the man who gored his father in cold blood, as he saw it. He had convinced himself over the years that she had taunted him by giving him seven daughters and one invalid son. It was with a clenched fist and a scowl that Percy sat through the ceremony. Hate burned in his eyes toward every individual standing around the infant. With the last amen he rushed his wife and daughters out of the doors of the sanctuary like he used to do when he drove his cattle.

Once back at Hawking Manor, the celebration continued. From the lavishly decorated estate, the smell of the pigs roasting over an open fire mingled with that of other delicacies and spread an inviting aroma over the blossoms of spring that had come sweetly to the manor's gardens. Inside the great ballroom, many guests had assembled. Friends, neighbors, officials from the nearby towns, the gentry and tenants the Carstairs had invited to celebrate Benjamin's christening had come. They were an uncommon lot, ladies and noblemen alongside common folk. Yet, all seemed to be happily enjoying the occasion.

The Carstairs were unafraid to part with conventions that separated people into stations by the luck of their birth. They did not hesitate to eat and dance with people less fortunate than they were. Samuel's father and mother had willed it so ever since Andrew, their youngest son who had been lost in the Americas for seven long years, miraculously came home one dark, wet day.

Among the many guests were Katherine Chesterton, Meredith's sister, and Lord James Chesterton, her husband. Their twenty-three year-old son was also in attendance. The Chesterton clan was rich but unhappy. Katherine was ten years older than Meredith, and for that reason the two had little in common. At eighteen, Katherine had married for wealth rather than love. She was beautiful, spoiled, and had been courted by many men before her marriage. But Lord Chesterton's wealth had turned her head and blinded her to his age, his arrogant nature, and his physical appearance. Katherine's unhappiness had surfaced when she, for the first time, laid eyes on Andrew Carstairs. She had fallen in love with him at first sight, and with that event the scales of blindness had fallen from her eyes. Her unhappiness had grown greater recognizing that Andrew was a kind and very principled man who could not be tempted to take advantage of a beautiful, married but unhappy woman..

James Chesterton thought himself besieged by legions of woes. He was insanely jealous of his much younger and beautiful wife. He found her hard to control, and he resented her need for constant company. Tormented by frequent nightmares, he often looked to fine liqueurs to soothe himself to sleep. His tenants, he was sure, cheated him. Sidney, his son, disappointed him. On top of it all, he was certain that some deathly sickness had started to eat away at him.

Sidney Chesterton, an only child, endowed with his mother's fine looks and his father's riches, had made it his mission in life to sow an abundance of wild oats, to spend much of his family's wealth, to seek out trouble whenever possible, and to cause his parents grief. His father's wish was that Sidney would start to show some interest in the many Chesterton enterprises, while his mother prayed for a wife for him who would be able to

bridle his wayward ways. To the date of Benjamin's christening, neither parent had seen the slightest indication that could give them any hope of Sidney's swift reform.

Another lady of note was Lady Holbrook. During the festivities of the day, she occupied herself tending to her husband who, like Lord Chesterton, was wealthy and much older than his beautiful wife. Unlike James Chesterton, he was a kind and gentle man, not at all demanding. Lydia, when she was not looking after her husband's needs, was valiantly trying to avoid Charles Dranton's advances. That captain repeatedly tried to engage Lydia alone. "My dear lady, forgive my boldness. You are the beauty of the ball," he had whispered to her during a moment she had spent in his presence. "Allow me to be your servant." His eyes and smile made known to the lady that the captain was no gentleman and that his designs were on her body.

"I am a happily married woman, my good captain," she replied, "and my husband has given me many servants."

"But has he been able to care for all your needs, my sweet lady? It seems to me there are longings in those beautiful eyes." The bold captain had shamelessly smiled into her blue eyes, a smile that would linger with her after she found refuge with her friend Meredith.

George Wickendew, distant neighbor, mayor of Five Oaks, comic philosopher, drunkard, and womanizer was also there with his frail wife and two spinster daughters. George proclaimed they had come only to pay their respects to the newest Carstairs and were shortly to return to their duties at home. Everyone who knew the Wickendews, however, was prepared to wager that the four would not leave until they had their fill of the delicacies and the fine wines the Carstairs served. To Samuel's great relief, the Lord Mayor seemed to be content with passing the hours to impress the ladies with his philosophies and not with his prowess with wine and foul speech. To Samuel's surprise, he drank only moderately and swore even less. So out of character was his demeanor that George drew more attention to himself than was usual. Several guests, as well as Samuel, were concerned enough to inquire about the man's health. Most at the gathering, however, expected to see the worst of George before the celebrations ended. "My dear Meredith, you equal the sun with your radiance." Wickendew approached Meredith with a huge smile on his fat face. "The sign of a virtuous woman, I say. Virtue will have no gentler image than Meredith with a baby in her arms." Meredith smiled back at the man who had stationed himself in front of her with a bow.

"Why Lord Mayor, you are an incorrigible flatterer. But tell me, I am dying to know, what is the sign of a virtuous man?"

"My good woman, you jest and seek such a man in vain. Men cannot be virtuous. They haven't the stomach for it." George punctuated his words with a volley of laughter and a pinch from his snuffbox. His laughter turned nearby heads and brought others to join the pair.

"Why, Mr. Wickendew," Katherine entered the conversation. "You give yourself not enough credit. Is it not a prerequisite for a Lord Mayor to be virtuous, pray tell?"

George turned his face to Meredith's sister. His eyes rested far too long on the exposed portion of her bosom. "My dear Lady Katherine, make no mistake. The man who parades virtue about is a knave and a rascal, a pretender, at the very least a fool."

While Katherine and the mayor conversed, Lydia Holbrook drew Meredith aside. "Your little Benjamin is adorable. How I envy you, Meredith. I'd give a kingdom for a child."

Meredith handed the small bundle to her friend. She put an arm around Lydia's shoulder to comfort her. "You mustn't quit trying. I hear it said that there is an herb in which lies a boon of fertility. As for giving a kingdom, I'm sure our good mayor would insist that you need only give your virtue."

Lydia stared at Meredith. "You don't mean I need to try with another man?" Her face was marked by surprise. "You can't possibly think that it is Anthony who can't." She did not finish the sentence.

Meredith turned her full attention to her friend. "I merely meant to make comment about George's wisdom, Lydia. But you must admit that your husband has as much to do with getting you in the family way as you yourself. It is all the more possible that Anthony can't father a child, since he has no offspring from the many years of his first marriage."

Lydia became quiet. She wasn't sure that the thought was of any comfort to her. Glad that Meredith changed the subject, she reluctantly gave up the child when Meredith invited her to give the baby to Annabelle Lowell, Meredith's servant girl. "It's Benjamin's feeding time," Meredith told Lydia. "Come with me, and keep me company while I give my little angel his dinner."

“Please let me carry him, Meredith.” Lydia’s whole being seemed to blossom with tenderness holding the baby. She cooed for the infant, spoke softly to him, and bonded with the child in her arms. Her smile told of her yearning.

Hannah found herself looking for ways to divert Sidney Chesterton’s attention from her. It seemed to her that Sidney spent altogether too much time trying to impress her. She knew of his reputation, although she had seen him only seldom in the past. He was attractive and charming, but the stories she had heard of his escapades made her uneasy when she was alone with him.

“Why, Sidney, you must not try to flatter me with words you have rehearsed a thousand times with wenches in every county. Have you kept count of the scores of little bastards who bear your looks? I hope to be flattered by an honest man.”

Sidney’s face brightened. “You injure me too greatly my dear Hannah. If I could only hope to gain your favor and approval, I should want no more.” He smiled at her in a playful way. “Will you at least do me the honor of a dance or two?”

Hannah giggled. “The dance floors may be the safest places to be with you. Let me assure you, dear Sidney, any steps amiss on your part will leave you dancing with your frock.”

“Indeed, I’ll join the priesthood if you shall have any complaint of how I dance in your presence, my beautiful Hannah.” He made a gallant bow and led her to the dance.

Meredith ushered Lydia into the sitting room. “Annabelle, would you please fetch some tea for Lady Holbrook and me? Bring a little honey to sweeten it for my friend.” Meredith seated herself. “Let me quickly set the table for my little one, Lydia. If you will kindly unwrap him and reach him to me, we’ll let him dine.” She bared one of her breasts, took Benjamin into her arms, and pressed his eager little mouth to her body. “Come sit by my side, Lydia, and tell me your plans for the spring.”

Lydia seated herself. The picture before her fascinated her. She looked with admiration at Meredith’s full, white breast. Meredith looked beautiful and strong. A contented smile graced her lips. She frequently cast loving glances at her feeding boy, and her free hand stroked his head tenderly. Lydia’s heart went out to him. His head was perfectly shaped. Soft locks touched the tops of his ears. It was difficult for Lydia to tear her eyes away from his beautiful face. His mouth and cheeks moved in a pleasant rhythm over the exposed breast of his mother. His eyes were closed, but the slow deliberate movements of his little fingers of one hand resting on Meredith’s arm told the onlooker that he was not asleep. “Your little Benjamin is an extraordinarily beautiful child, Meredith. He will make the heart of many women skip in his day, I dare say.” Lydia became quiet. A faraway look had entered her eyes; uncomfortable thoughts crowded in on her.

Meredith began to softly sing a lullaby to her baby when Annabelle entered with the tea. “Thank you, Annabelle,” she said to the girl. “Our little one wants to sleep soon. You may go and return to the party. Please see to it that Henry does not indulge himself too much on the sweet things. Hannah tends to spoil him too much.”

The rest of the afternoon continued to pass in a pleasant manner until the last dance was announced. Captain Charles Dranton had looked without success for Lydia, who he hoped to lead to the dance floor again. Having searched in vain, he made his way to Hannah and arrived at her side at the same time Sidney Chesterton did. Both, in unison, made a bow to the young lady saying, “Lady Hannah, would you do me the honor.” They stopped their request abruptly, glared at each other, and hissed as if speaking with one mouth. “Give way!”

Hannah found the scene comical for a second. She laughed and sighed, “I shall not dance again this day, gentlemen. Take your ease.” She smiled at them, turned, and walked briskly to Andrew’s side.

The two left standing by themselves were in no mood to be gentlemen. Their foolish pride would not let them walk away. “Have you no silly war to fight or some older woman to entertain, Captain that you must spoil the day for the young lady?” Sidney grinned wickedly at Charles.

The captain, six years older than Sidney, detested the rich, younger man. His eyes consumed Sidney. Charles’ face was like stone. Only the slight twitch in his right cheek told of the excitement he felt. “Away with you spoiled moron before I teach you some manners.” Charles’ voice was icy.

Sidney laughed into Charles’ face like one who had no care. “I think the old boy had too much of the Carstairs’ fine wine today or else he has been taken with a touch of the jester’s folly,” he remarked to a group

of young men chatting near them. Mischief was stamped on Sidney's face. "Can you not see how his mouth twitches from sucking a bottle or his thumb this past hour?"

Sidney turned back to the captain. His eyes taunted the man who had gripped tightly the shaft of his polished sword. "You will give me satisfaction if you are not a cowardly rogue." Charles hissed quietly. There was no mistaking his deadly intentions. "Contrary to convention, you may choose the weapon; sword or pistol. I shall expect you beyond the yard by the pond momentarily." With those words he turned and hastened from the house.

The scene had caught the attention of many who stood within earshot. Andrew was the first to walk to Sidney's side. "You will not be so foolish as to give in to him Sidney, will you?" Andrew entreated him. "No good can come of it. You will mar a joyful day and displease my father. You may also have to answer to the law. Come with me to beg his forgiveness and settle the matter peacefully."

"I cannot stand to be called a coward, Andrew. It will do my reputation harm. I'm not afraid of a uniform that covers a bloated ego. The captain shall have some of my lead or take back his words." Sidney's face had turned ashen, but there was a determined look in his eyes. Slowly he began to make his way toward the door leading to the yard and the pond.

Hannah became anxious when she heard Charles demand satisfaction. She hurried to where Samuel and his father conversed with the Chestertons. Quickly she alerted the men to the impending trouble. "I fear some blood may be shed if no one intervenes forthwith," she fearfully stammered and pointed in the direction of the pond.

Lady Katherine, immediately afraid, shrieked at her husband. "Do something to stop this madness, Anthony!"

Lord Chesterton nervously looked around the room. "Who can we send out, Henry? Is there one here to enforce the law?" he blustered. "I fear that boy will be the death of me."

He had not finished speaking before Henry and Samuel hurried outside and walked briskly toward the pond where Charles stood near the water with Sidney approaching him. A crowd of guests who were not dancing and who had guessed that something was amiss followed the men slowly. Hannah ran to find Meredith. George Wickendew made after the crowd cautiously, taking great pains to stay back of the people who began to assemble along side of the combatants who had settled on pistols as the weapon of choice. "You will not spoil my son's day, Charles. I give you warning," Samuel addressed the captain sternly.

Henry Carstairs first confronted Sidney. "Son, I insist you put down your weapon. There shall be no duel, no blood spilled on my property. The king's law will be honored here. Has any good ever come from such business?" He turned to Charles. "Young men's follies lead to an early grave for one and mountains of rue into old age or the gallows for the other. What satisfaction is that?"

Sidney stood undecided. "The king will forgive us some sport," he said slowly without conviction.

Captain Dranton made no attempt to put his pistol away. Samuel stepped from the side where the onlookers stood and walked between the two men who were facing each other some twenty paces apart. He stepped toward Charles. His eyes were fixed into those of the captain. "It is my wish that you both leave Hawking Manor today peacefully and alive. We can all finish this day happily, or you will cross swords with me if you are left standing. I know that you are a proud but intelligent man, my friend. I would rather welcome you back to our house than carry you to a cold bed."

Charles' face softened. "I beg your pardon, Sir Henry and Samuel. I behaved badly." He turned to Sidney who had uncocked his pistol. "I mean you no further harm, Sidney," he said plainly, but the iciness had not left his voice. Under his breath he murmured silently, "It will do you good to stay out of my sight, man."

"Let's not have any more of this nonsense, men," George Wickendew now stepped in front of the crowd. "Put up your weapons! I order you to do so swiftly in the name of the king. There now, that's better." He continued to trumpet directions. "You will leave with me and my family directly, good captain. We'll have a glass of wine at my house to see you on to your quarters, and all will be well. What say you?"

Charles had to smile at the pretensions of the older man, but he agreed to escort the Wickendews. "Thank you, my valiant friend." Charles smiled. "I shall have the stable boy fetch my horse, and we can be off to your good hall." He turned to speak to Samuel again for a short time before proceeding to the stables.

Meredith and Lydia arrived just in time to witness George Wickendew pretend to take charge. They watched his antics for a short time. The whole affair between the two young men had a sobering effect on

many of the guests. A number of them prepared for their departure. Some who did not have a great distance to travel, however, were content to resume the celebration, albeit in a more subdued fashion.

Young Henry had gone to look for his mother, but missed her and Lydia. The two had hurried out through the shortest exit while he meandered through the front door. Thinking he would find his mother in Benjamin's room, Henry knocked on that door briefly and entered. Not finding his mother there, but seeing his brother asleep in the cradle, he stepped to its side. Henry stared at the sleeping Benjamin. "Go away!" he murmured. He pinched the baby's arm and hurried from the room, leaving his brother screaming.

Melissa, who had come to her room to show a friend her clarinet, heard the baby cry. She left her friend and raced to Benjamin's room. Seeing no one but the crying baby, she began to speak softly to him. "Hush, hush, my little sweet. What is the trouble?" She almost sang the words bending over him. "You mustn't cry. Your mommy isn't far, and Lissa is here." She stroked her brother's cheek gently and whispered to him. Benjamin looked at her and became quiet. Melissa wiped his tears away, sang a lullaby to him, and within a few minutes the little one was asleep again.

The sky sparkled with stars when Sir Henry and Elizabeth, his wife, standing beside Meredith and Samuel said goodnight to the Chestertons, their last guests. Their carriage had been ready and waiting for them for an hour during which Lord Chesterton developed a curious cough. In spite of his many admonitions to Katherine to begin the journey home, he was forced to feign exhaustion and look on as his wife sought out the last opportunities to enjoy herself.

Sidney, meanwhile, did his best to convince Hannah that the stories she had heard about him were nothing more than idle gossip spread abroad by those who wished to do his reputation harm. "If I could leave this night knowing that you think no ill of me, my dear Hannah, Benjamin's christening will have been a godsend for me."

"A blessing this child is, I grant you. Hawking Manor shall be the brighter for him. As for your reputation, my dear Sidney, let us say that it will take more than my word to make amends." Hannah smiled at Sidney, and the sparkle in her eyes made his heart skip. "Yet, who can say that tomorrow may not be a different day?"