

A More Perfect Union

A Novel by Fred McKibben

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Chapter 1

Sara squirmed her hips to the left, then to the right. Panic rose in her throat as he forced apart her naked thighs, but she would not surrender to him. Her arms now free, she rose to one elbow and fired her right fist as hard as she could at the monster looming over her. But the blow only strengthened his determination. He shoved her down again and ripped away the last of her undergarments.

"I will have what is rightfully mine," her husband shouted down at her.

"No," Sara managed to shout back, even as he grasped her neck hard below the jaw.

"Do your duty, man," her husband commanded the man standing behind her.

Sara shuddered as the other man's gnarled hands grasped her biceps and forced stillness on her upper body. She twisted her head to the right and saw her father's crooked fingers and swollen knuckles.

She closed her eyes, gritted her teeth and waited. First, the monster's fingers were inside her, moving rapidly up and down, then deeper into her vagina. Her heart beat faster as she tried again to force her legs together. But he was between her thighs now and she felt his erection enter her, one strong hand now massaging her breast. Once inside her, he paused for a few seconds, then began to thrust himself in and out, at first long and slow, then shorter and faster, until he emitted a guttural moan and she felt his body relax.

May 22, 1787

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Sara Sullivan threw the covers off the bed and swung her feet to the floor. A drop of sweat trickled its way between her breast beneath the thin cotton shift she had slept in. Gradually, she gained control of her breathing, reminding herself that the nightmare was only a dream now. Eight years, a new name, and a large ocean separated her from that horrible night. The monster was dead. Her father was dead too, but still, the images followed her.

With her hand, she brushed a red curl away from her eyes and took two steps to the window. A faint glow washed across the eastern horizon, but daylight was at least a half-hour away. She looked at the porcelain clock on the table beside her bed but couldn't make out the time in the dim light. She should go back to bed and wait for the morning sun to flow through the window, but the dream might come back and the thought of that made her cringe.

She peered out the window again. Only the earliest risers were on the streets, those who prepared the homes and businesses of the city for the fortunate ones who would rise with the sun, or later, and expect tea and toast on a tray, a copy of the Pennsylvania Chronicle

folded neatly next to the teapot. The darkened city with its few scattered lights reminded Sara of her last view of Dublin from aboard a Dutch freighter sailing out of the harbor well before daylight.

Her hands swirled around the little table until she found the tinderbox. She removed the cover and took the flint and steel from its little compartment on one side. Henrietta would have made sure there was a low fire burning in the kitchen downstairs, but Sara didn't like trying to tread the narrow staircase in the dark. She tapped the steel on the flint rock several times before a decent spark appeared in the tinder. She returned the flint and steel to their compartment and took one of the sulfur tipped sticks from its compartment. The sulfur ignited when she touched it to the spark. Sara knew the sulfur would burn away quickly so she deftly lifted the globe and lit a whale oil lamp on the table.

She took her robe from the bedpost and slipped it on over her shift. The light from the lamp cast a yellowish glow as she descended the staircase and proceeded down a short hallway toward the kitchen. She stopped and tapped on the last door before the kitchen.

"Yes'om," came a groggy reply from inside.

Sara pushed the door open and leaned inside. "You sleep in a while this morning, Hennie," she said. "I'll take care of breakfast for Mr. Martin."

"Yes'om," the black woman acknowledged.

Sara closed the door and went into the kitchen, where she stoked the embers in the iron stove and added kindling, then two chunks of coal from a box by the stove. Like many colonial homes, the "kitchen" at Sullivan House was the place where foodstuff was stored and where meals were made ready for serving. The small stove in the room was for heat and to warm kettles of water for tea or wash basins. Roasting, baking and frying took place in a small "cookhouse" that was separated from the main house by several yards.

Despite her entreaties, Sara knew Henrietta would be up and ready to work before daylight. The aging black woman had come with the house when Sara had purchased it four years earlier. She had not realized that a slave would come with the house until her agent announced the transaction was completed.

Sara knew something of slavery, having lived some months in Martinique before she arrived in the colonies. The notion of it repelled her. On the occasion of their first meeting, she informed Henrietta that she was free to leave. Henrietta had other ideas, though. While she liked the idea of freedom, she also knew that the handful of freedmen in Philadelphia endured difficult lives. They lived in camps or hovels and begged for the most menial work. So Sara and Henrietta agreed that, while the black woman was free, she would continue to live and work at the boarding house, which Sara intended to call Sullivan House. They agreed upon a small salary and the agent prepared a simple document declaring Henrietta's freedom. Like most slaves, Henrietta had no last name, but as the agent prepared the document, she announced that her name would be Henrietta Washington, taking the name of the most famous American.

Looking back now, Sara realized that Hennie had been a godsend. She'd made it possible for a twenty-three-year-old Irish girl from the slums of Dublin to make Sullivan House a success. While Sara knew something of cooking and cleaning, she knew nothing

about hosting boarders, or cooking to please the strange American taste.

Sullivan House was just one of over a hundred boarding houses in Philadelphia and almost all the others were operated by older ladies, many widowed during the recent war of independence. In the beginning, rumors and innuendo flew around the town. Why would a beautiful, young, unmarried woman want to run a boarding house? For the widow-ladies the answer seemed obvious; the world's oldest profession was expanding from the waterfront to the heart of the city.

The widow-ladies watched the comings and goings at Sullivan House, and they prodded the mayor and various constables to watch, as well. But, after two years of watching, it was clear to all that Sullivan House was just what it presented itself to be.

If anything, though, the fact that Sullivan House was not a house of prostitution only deepened the mystery of Sara Sullivan herself. In the beginning, the widow-ladies reaction to her mystified and hurt Sara, but over time, her bewilderment turned into amusement. So much so she sometimes started rumors herself just to see how far they spread and how they came back to her.

Sara understood that her appearance gave her some advantage against the widow-ladies when men came to the city on business and sought accommodations. Her hair was the first thing people noticed. It was red, but with enough blond to soften the color and catch the sunlight. She was fair-skinned, as were most with such hair, but unlike most, she picked up color from the sun without showing freckles. When she chose the right clothing, she could show off a fine figure, but she rarely chose such clothing, preferring to dampen the effect instead. It wasn't that Sara didn't like being pretty. She did, but she knew from experience that being pretty could be dangerous.

Guests at Sullivan House usually stayed for a few days, or a few weeks at most, before concluding their business and moving on. While many of the houses in the city took on permanent renters, Sara had never been inclined to do so and priced her accommodations so as to discourage anyone seeking permanent quarters. As a result, Sullivan House often had vacant rooms. It was less profitable than most other establishments and that was fine with Sara. She'd come to Philadelphia with some money — something else for the widow-ladies to speculate about — but she doubted it was enough to live on indefinitely. Anyway, she'd rather have something to do besides wait for a husband or become a seamstress. The income the house produced, along with her savings, was enough to assure her independence.

Sara touched the stove top with a fingertip and judged it warm enough for the teapot, which she filled from a water bucket hanging from a peg on the wall. While she waited for the water to steam, she retrieved butter and jam from the larder and sliced the remains of yesterday's bread. In the dining room next to the kitchen, she spread the curtains open and noted daylight had begun to erase the darkness. She hoped it would also erase the dream.

A low hum from the teapot drew her back to the kitchen where she prepared herself a cup of strong tea. She added a pinch of sugar and sat down at a small table near the stove. As she tasted the first sip of the dark liquid, she heard Henrietta's petticoats rustling in the hallway. A second later, the slender black woman was in the kitchen rearranging the food

Sara had just set out.

“Sit down, Hennie,” Sara suggested. “Have a cup of tea.”

“I got to poot some ham out, Miss Sara. You know Mr. Martin love dot ham.” Sara loved the rhythm of the woman’s speech. Despite nearly twenty years in Philadelphia, she still spoke with the melodic accent of her Caribbean upbringing.

“Yes,” Sara conceded.

“Cheese too,” Henrietta added.

“Of course,” Sara agreed. In four years, she couldn’t remember a single time she’d laid out a meal that exactly met Henrietta’s standards.

Henrietta cocked her head, “I think I hear the man stirrin’ about now.”

“He’s leaving today,” Sara said. “I expect he’ll want to get started early.”

“So he will,” Henrietta said, “and I won’t be so sad to see his backside goin’ down the road.”

“Nor will I,” Sara agreed. In fact, during the two weeks Henry Martin had been a guest at Sullivan House, he’d managed to resurrect all of the old fears and resentments Sara sometimes felt in the company of men. Most of the time, she had no trouble assuming the posture of a business woman and keeping the men at arms-length, and she had done so with Henry Martin. It was a skill that was necessary since almost all of her guests were men.

Martin had finally received the shipment of British goods he’d come to retrieve and had hired wagons to haul them to western towns where he expected to sell them at an enormous profit. British goods were difficult to come by in the states so soon after the war, but Martin had arranged the shipments through a cousin in Trinidad.

“When dot fancy lady come visit?” Henrietta asked.

“Ten o’clock this morning,” Sara answered. She almost giggled at the notion of Sarah Bache referred to as a “fancy lady”. As the daughter of the famous Benjamin Franklin, she might have been the most distinguished woman in Philadelphia, but by the standards of the English ladies Sara had seen in her youth, Mrs. Bache was rough around the edges. Still, it was an important event for Sullivan House and Sara had been nervous and excited since the messenger had come yesterday.

“Make sure Mr. Martin is out before ten,” Sara instructed Henrietta, whom she knew would be far more effective at dislodging the boarder than she would be herself.

She needn’t have worried about Mr. Martin. He was down from his room almost as soon as the daylight was full, his bags packed and ready to leave. He gulped down his tea with a bit of the bread and ham, paid for his last week of lodging, then headed out to find his wagons loaded with goods, presumably thinking of the small fortune he was about to reap.

Sara examined herself in the mirror atop the dresser in her bedroom and judged the plain blue skirt with a single petticoat and white blouse — buttoned all the way to her neck

— to be just the right attire to greet the distinguished lady. She smiled at her own image. The blue was particularly pleasing since she was never allowed to wear it in her youth. Even though English sumptuary laws had been repealed nearly two centuries earlier, her father had feared alienating the powerful British nobility in Dublin.

Henrietta agreed that the look was just right while she pinned a mass of red curls behind her head before running downstairs to escort Mrs. Bache into the parlor and offer tea. Sara peeked out the window to verify that the lady's carriage was parked in front of Sullivan House, took two deep breaths to calm her nerves, then started down the stairs.

She shouldn't be nervous, she told herself. After all, when the British abandoned the city in 1778, they took anyone still loyal to the crown with them. And certainly, the daughter of one of the most famous American rebels wouldn't give her secrets away even if she learned them.

"I'm very honored by your visit, Mrs. Bache," Sara said as she entered the parlor.

"The honor is mine," Sarah Bache said. "Folks speak highly of your establishment." Henrietta had placed cups of tea on the small table between them and Sarah Bache took a sip from one, her eyes wandering around the neatly furnished parlor.

"You're very kind."

"Please call me Sarah, Mrs. Sullivan," Mrs. Bache insisted.

"Then you should call me Sara, as well," Sara responded.

"I seem to hear a bit of Irish in your accent."

"Yes," Sara acknowledged. "I grew up in Dublin." For the most part, she'd managed to hide the Irish brogue from her new neighbors, except for the occasional O or R. The less they knew about her past, the better.

"What you have accomplished here is impressive," the older woman observed. "Especially after being widowed at such a young age."

"Business could be better, I suppose." Somehow the story had developed over her four years in Philadelphia that Sara was the widow of a Caribbean sugar planter, and being Irish, detested the English. Parts of the story were Sara's own creation and other parts the creation of rumor mongers. Some variations of the story even had Mr. Sullivan alive in an English prison. She made no effort to dissuade either version of the story, especially since the later provided a reason for not remarrying.

"Perhaps business will be better," Sarah Bache said. "I've come on behalf of my father and the Congress," she added.

"Oh?"

"Yes. You may have heard there is to be a gathering of delegates from all of the states to discuss revisions to our Articles of Confederation."

"I did hear that Mr. Madison is in town and that some meetings are planned."

"Very important meetings," Sarah Bache said. "The future of the United States lies in the balance. The Articles simply are not sufficient to make a nation."

"How can I be of assistance?"

“We still lack suitable lodgings for some of the delegates,” Sarah Bache explained. “If you could take in at least two delegates — and their servants — it would be enormously helpful. The Congress has agreed to pay a very fair board for the duration of the convention.”

Sara suppressed a groan. About the only thing the Congress of the confederated states was famous for was not paying its bills; not too surprising since the Congress of the United States of America had no source of income other than begging the individual states for funds. She suspected that many of the boarding establishments in the city had already declined to provide boarding for that very reason.

“I’d be delighted,” Sara said. If nothing else came of it, she expected Sullivan House would gain a measure of prestige.

“Thank you, Mrs. Sullivan,” Sarah Bache said, reverting to the more formal address. “I expect Mr. Oliver of Connecticut and his servant to arrive tomorrow or the next day. Will you be ready to accommodate them on such short notice?”

“Of course,” Sara said. “Who else should I expect?”

“That we shall see as the delegates arrive.”

Chapter 2

May 22, 1787

Trenton, New Jersey

John Oliver examined the horizon. The sun was low in the sky; an hour to sunset, he judged. Despite the remaining daylight, his aching backside assured him it was time to get out of the saddle for this day.

“We’ll stop here for the night,” he said to Ned Foster.

“Sure seems like a good idea to me, Mr. Oliver,” the slender black man said. Like Oliver, the valet hadn’t spent more than a few hours in the saddle on any given occasion in years. Now, they’d ridden for nearly a solid week, generally bedding down on the ground for nights of fitful sleep.

The road widened as they entered Trenton and before they’d gone far into the town, John Oliver saw a stable advertising livery for hire. He slid down from his horse and led it to the open barn door, Ned Foster following close behind, tugging along his mount and the pack mule tethered to it.

A large man emerged from the barn to greet them, a leather blacksmith’s apron tight against his bulging chest. Underneath the apron, a plain white shirt had turned dingy gray from the soot of the bellows. Sweat glistened on his powerful forearms and dripped from his dark hair and mustache.

“You fellas looking for a place to rest those animals?” the smith asked.

“That we are,” Oliver replied. “We’d also like to find a place to rest our own bones for the night.”

The smith looked from Oliver to Ned Foster, then said, “Tenth house straight ahead on the left. Mrs. Alston’s got a nice place, and she’s got slave quarters for your boy.”

Oliver stared at the smith for several seconds before replying. “Mr. Foster is not a slave, sir. He will need quarters the same as mine.”

“Well, that would be up to Mrs. Alston, I guess,” the smith said, “but, she’s particular about her reputation.”

“In case we don’t meet Mrs. Alston’s particular requirements, can we bed down in your hay loft?” He really wanted to sleep in a nice, soft bed, but the hay loft would be an improvement over sleeping on the ground as they had for several nights in a row.

“Yep,” the blacksmith said. “Be a dollar for the both of you. Spanish dollar, none of that Continental junk,” he added.

“Don’t worry about me, Mr. Oliver,” Ned Foster said in his deep, smooth voice. “You get a good night of sleep.”

John Oliver knew his valet would say something along those lines and he knew the man meant it sincerely. But Oliver had no intention of taking quarters in a house that would

deny a decent room to his servant, a free man by the laws of the state of Connecticut.

“We’ll see what the lady says,” Oliver said to the smith, “but I expect you’ll have two guests in your hayloft for the night.”

“Yep,” the smith agreed. “There’s an oil lamp hanging on the post up there. Be sure you don’t catch the loft afire.”

Mrs. Alston’s warm smile had faded quickly when she realized Oliver intended for the black man to sleep in one of her rooms. She assured them that the slave quarters behind the house were clean and warm. Again, Ned Foster assured him the quarters would be adequate for one night. Still, Oliver declined the offer and the two had sauntered back to the livery barn with two pails containing roasted chicken, biscuits and turnip greens provided by Mrs. Alston’s kitchen for a small price.

Dim light from the lantern gave the strewn hay of the loft a golden glow as the two men sat on their bedrolls finishing the meal. In spite of her frostiness toward Ned, Oliver had to admit that Mrs. Alston’s kitchen did put out a first-class meal, which he hoped would erase the memory of dried meat and molded bread from the night before. John Oliver wasn’t a stranger to rough living. He’d spent five years as a captain in the Continental Army, sleeping when and where he could, and sometimes going days without a meal of any kind, much less Mrs. Alston’s roast chicken.

For Oliver, the war ended on September 5, 1781, at the Battle of Chesapeake, when a dying British officer had put a pistol ball into his backside. During his recuperation in Baltimore, the French and American armies finally forced the British to surrender at Yorktown on October 19, effectively ending the war. A month later, John Oliver hired a small carriage and driver to take him back to his farm northwest of Hartford. The bumping, jostling ride had convinced him that there should be very few reasons ever to leave the farm again.

“You got something on your mind,” Ned Foster said. “That I can tell.” By now, Oliver was accustomed to Ned’s odd accent and sometimes unusual way of speaking. He was born in the islands but had spent most of his thirty-five years as a household servant for a quarrelsome British nobleman who was bitter at being marooned in the new world. The resulting speech pattern could sound melodic at times, but more often it was stiffly English.

“I was thinking about the war,” Oliver said.

“You got better things to think about, now,” the valet said to him.

“I suppose I do,” Oliver agreed.

In fact, thinking about almost anything was better than thinking about the war and everything that had happened. Victory was sweet, but the price had been high for John Oliver. The wound to his buttocks was the least of it.

“That business is finished,” Foster said. “Now, you and those other gentlemen are going to make a new nation.”

“You’re right about the nation, Ned,” Oliver said, “but that business won’t be finished

until I have my son back.”

“Sir William got scared when the fires started. He thought for sure those rebels were going to come running through New York looking for him. He was consumed with panic and he convinced Mrs. Betsy and the boy to escape to Staten Island with him. She sent me to find you and tell you that she’d be back as soon as she could, but what with the fire and the riots, I didn’t find you for four days.”

“She never came back,” Oliver lamented. “I went to the house and one of the maids told me they were gone back to England. She was crying because they didn’t take her with them.”

“The British held the city after all, so Sir William and Mrs. Becky could’ve stayed until the war was over,” Foster said.

“Sir William didn’t want to stay,” Oliver said. “He never wanted to be here. He didn’t trust his brother, always worried he would somehow cheat him out of inheriting the title. Now, I’m not sure Becky wanted to stay either.”

“Of course she wanted to stay,” Foster tried to reassure him.

“Two days after that, the British hung Wilton Rogers. He wasn’t even a rebel.”

“They were looking for someone to blame and Wilton Rogers was handy,” Foster reminded Oliver.

“In two days’ time, I’d lost my wife, my son, and my best friend to the English. I hadn’t cared much for the revolt before that time, but it became my passion.”

“Tomorrow we’re going to be in Philadelphia and you can start working on a new passion, building a great nation.”

“Sometimes you’re a dreamer, Ned,” Oliver said. “Making a nation from these states will be no easy task. The states won’t be amenable to surrendering their sovereignty.”

“If they do not unite, the British will come back one day,” Foster said. It wasn’t the first time Ned had expressed such a sentiment and John Oliver had come to respect the valet’s understanding of politics and international affairs. He was educated by Sir William’s household staff in England and New York and read every pamphlet or newspaper he found.

“That is truth without doubt,” Oliver agreed. “If we continue this useless confederation, the British, or the French, or the Spaniards will splinter the states into their own dominions.”

“Yes.”

“We must hope that good men of strong purpose will hold forth at this convention and unite us in spite of our differences.”

“There are many things they will agree on,” Ned Foster said, “and one they will not.”

“Slavery, of course,” John Oliver acknowledged.

“Yes.”

“It must be reckoned with somehow, Ned. If we should form a nation without resolving the issue of slavery, the abscess will continue to fester.”

“The southern states will not join a union that deprives them of their wealth,” Ned

Foster said.

“And an honorable nation cannot countenance the notion of human property.”

“Who are these honorable nations, I wonder?” Ned Foster questioned. “It seems to me that just about every nation is happy to profit from slavery, whether by practicing the trade or by trading with those who do.”

John Oliver lowered his head and let out a long sigh. The wiry black man knew far more about slavery than he ever would. For most of his life, Ned Foster had been a slave, including twenty years in the household of John Oliver’s father-in-law, Sir William Black.

“You have seen that with your own eyes,” Oliver conceded. He’d only learned of Sir William’s interest in slaving ships after his father-in-law had escaped New York with Betsy and Caleb, not even two-years-old at the time.

“I never understood how a man could be so kind on the one hand, and so evil on the other,” Foster said.

“He thought nothing of taking my wife and child with him.”

“Mrs. Betsy thought they would be back in a few days,” Foster observed. “The fire was a scare, but the British held the city.”

“She didn’t come back,” Oliver said again. “I got a letter from her some weeks later. She was in England and her father had convinced her that she and Caleb could never be safe in America again.”

Ned Foster stared toward their shadows thrown on the hayloft wall by the light from the lantern. In the years since those days in New York, John Oliver had learned that Ned Foster always considered his words carefully before speaking. He waited. Finally, Ned turned back to him.

“That letter made you a slave owner,” Foster said.

“I was a slave owner for a single day,” Oliver said. That was true because Betsy’s letter had gifted ownership of Ned Foster to John Oliver. The next day, he found a magistrate who signed a document declaring Ned Foster a free man. “You’re free now,” Oliver added.

“You’re a good man, John Oliver,” Ned Foster said, “but you don’t understand what makes a man free. Folks like Mrs. Alston don’t care about that document we made. They just look at the color of my skin and think I’m a slave, or something that amounts to the same thing.”

Oliver opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He knew Ned was right. If, against all odds, the convention was able to make a constitution that freed all the slaves, it would only be the beginning of a new kind of problem. “We have to find a way, Ned,” he finally said.

“It won’t be easy to undo the evil that’s been done.”

“We must undo it, though,” Oliver observed. “Repatriation to their native countries, perhaps?” It was an idea he’d heard many politicians expound in recent months.

“Repatriation won’t work,” Ned Foster explained. “Most of the slaves don’t even know what place they came from. They don’t have any family there and they don’t speak the language. Besides, the plantation owners won’t give them up. The white men will say

they're free, but they'll have no place to go, no job to feed themselves, except to stay and work the land for pennies."

Oliver shrugged and reached for the lantern. "Let's get some sleep," he said.

The hayloft had indeed proved to be superior to those nights of sleeping on the ground. John Oliver had awakened before sunrise and nudged Ned Foster awake soon after, and by that time faint red sunlight illuminated the eastern sky, the pair rode slowly out of Trenton. With fair weather and good riding conditions, they had reached Philadelphia by mid-afternoon.

He hadn't given much thought as to what sort of reception he would get upon arrival at the Pennsylvania Statehouse, but he supposed he had expected someone would be there to greet arriving delegates. Instead, he'd awakened a sleeping bailiff who'd gone off to find Mr. Madison's aide at a nearby tavern. A short time later, the aide, smelling of rum, had recorded the particulars about John Oliver in a brown ledger book, and given him a letter he was to present to his hostess, Mrs. Sullivan.

Sullivan House was one street north and two streets west of the Statehouse, also known as Independence Hall. Oliver and Ned Foster walked the short distance with their horses and pack mule in tow. When they reached the house, Ned unloaded the luggage onto the walkway by the street before leading the three animals to a nearby livery barn Mr. Madison's aide had suggested. Oliver watched as Ned led the animals away, then lifted the heavy door knocker.

Chapter 3

The acrid scent of strong ale and halitosis assaulted her nostrils such that she turned her head away from the old priest, hoping the smell would pass her by, and maybe his words as well. But it didn't work. The odor remained strong and Father O'Malley's words swirled around in her head.

"Ye must marry him," the old priest said.

"I won't," Sara Byrne insisted.

"Aye, ye must, and ye will."

"Why must I?" Sara asked. "Am I not a free woman?"

"Is any Irishman free, I wonder?" the priest mused. "And, if a man be not free, then certainly a woman be not."

"I despise him," Sara spit out.

"Aye, maybe ye do," Father O'Malley said. "But a marriage to a high-born Englishman is a very rare thing for a young woman of your station, and ye willn't be the first woman to despise a husband."

May 23, 1787

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The sound of the metal knocker against the heavy oak door aroused Sara. She wasn't sure if she'd been asleep or merely daydreaming, but the image of Father O'Malley, and the smell of him, had been as clear as her memory could produce. She thought of the despair she felt that day as she walked back to the tiny house her father rented for the family. Before that day, she considered Father O'Malley a decent man who drank more than he should. But now she understood the priest had taken Alfred Carlisle's money to bless the marriage, just like her father had done. She didn't know how much money, but assumed it was impressive. The amount didn't matter though, her father and two worthless brothers would soon waste it on drink. Father O'Malley would probably do the same.

The sound of the front door swinging open and Henrietta's voice offering a greeting to someone prompted Sara to get up from the comfortable settee where she'd been napping. She hurried to the entrance hall where she found Hennie closing the door behind a tall man in need of a bath and a shave.

"Mrs. Sullivan, I presume," the man said, as he removed his rumpled broad-brimmed hat and bowed a dirty mop of brown hair in her direction. As he straightened, he extended a folded paper toward her.

She perused the short letter quickly. "I was expecting you, Mr. Oliver," Sara said. She hadn't thought much about what a delegate to the great meeting would look like but had

supposed they would be distinguished gentlemen of their state. She knew little of Connecticut, but it was hard to believe the man she saw before her now was one of their most prominent. His breeches must have been white once, but were now a dusty brown, almost matching the color of his knee-high leather riding boots. Though fashionable, his black coat and brown waistcoat were as dirty as the breeches. It was a warm day, and beneath the unbuttoned waistcoat, a once white shirt clung to his chest, yet the cravat around his neck was still tied perfectly.

“That is correct madam,” Oliver said.

“Welcome to Sullivan House, Mr. Oliver,” Sara said. “I trust you will be comfortable here.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Sullivan,” he said. As usual, Sara felt his eyes linger on her shape a bit too long.

“I was told you have a servant, as well,” Sara said.

“Yes, he’s gone to take the horses to the livery.”

“We have excellent quarters in the attic for our guest’s slaves.”

“I’m sure those quarters are quite nice, but Mr. Foster is not a slave. He is my valet and if possible, he should have a room near my own.”

Sara did a quick mental calculation. There were two bedrooms on the first floor, one of which was Hennie’s room, and four on the second, one being her own room. The attic had four beds in two rooms.

“I am expecting another delegate in the next few days,” Sara said. “Mrs. Bache said the Congress would pay, but I don’t know if they will pay for an extra room.”

“Madam Sullivan,” Oliver said. “The Congress may have difficulty paying for one room, let alone two. But don’t concern yourself of that. I shall pay in Spanish gold for both rooms while we are here.”

“Very well then,” Sara said. He might look like of wayfarer, but Spanish gold meant she wouldn’t have to worry about the nearly worthless currency the congress would try to pay with. Then to Hennie, she said, “Show Mr. Oliver to his room, Hennie, and set up the room next to it for his valet.”

“Most grateful, madam,” Oliver said.

“I’m sure you’ll be wanting a bath,” Sara said. “Henrietta will bring a wash basin and warm water up to your room.”

Oliver bent at the waist and examined his lower half. “I suppose I could use a wash,” he grinned.

Ten minutes after Hennie had led John Oliver to the largest bedroom on the second floor, she opened the door for an equally dusty black man. Sara watched from the hall as he easily hauled two large packets into the anteroom. About the same height as Mr. Oliver — six feet almost — but leaner, he introduced himself to Hennie, while also eying Sara in the background. He was younger than Oliver, but his curly black hair showed a sharply receding hairline above the temples, and as he lowered the packets to the floor, she noticed a wide round bald area on the crown of his head.

“We’re expecting you, Mr. Foster,” Sara said before Hennie could answer. “Henrietta will show you to your room, it’s next door to Mr. Oliver.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” he answered. His accent surprised her. There was enough Englishness to put her off, but something else that was pleasant. The islands of course. The way he said “ma’am” was just the way Hennie said the word.

“I jus’ taken a wash basin to Mr. Oliver. Ye’ll be needin’ a bath ye’self, man,” Hennie said to him. “I bring a basin to ye.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Foster nodded to Hennie.

While Henrietta led Ned Foster upstairs, Sara returned to the comfortable settee in the parlor. Two days with no boarders in the house had been restful. She understood she needed boarders to make a living, but an empty Sullivan House was the most peaceful place she’d ever lived. Sometimes she sat in the parlor and read from the books that had been on the bookshelves when she purchased the house. Other times, she helped Henrietta with the housework or the laundry. On warm sunny days, she and Hennie would walk around the town, usually with no particular destination in mind, but often stopping to admire the goods in various shop windows.

Sara walked to the parlor window and looked out on Third Street. A rustic wagon pulled by an ancient ox clacked its way slowly toward Market Street with a load of hay probably bound for the livery barn on Dock Street. She heard footsteps on the wooden floor above her head, then she listened as the same footsteps came down the stairs. She turned around as Hennie entered the parlor.

“What do you make of our guests, Hennie?” Sara asked.

“I’ll hold onto my judgemen’ bout Mista Oliver till I see ‘em cleaned up a bit,” the older woman answered. “That Ned Foster, though. He make an old girl want to be young again.”

“I thought I saw those eyes of yours lingering on that man,” Sara laughed.

“Linger they did, Miss Sara,” Hennie said. Henrietta had always referred to Sara as “Miss Sara” even though she was supposedly the widow of Mr. Sullivan, and Sara had never corrected her. They had never discussed the matter, but Sara suspected Henrietta knew that Mr. Sullivan was simply a ruse.

With Henrietta’s help, Sara had learned to keep meals simple at Sullivan House. At home in Dublin, her father and brothers drank away what little money came in, leaving almost nothing for the pantry. Besides, her mother had died without ever teaching the girl the skills needed to cook over the small open fireplace in their little house. Sara was more adept at stealing apples, potatoes, and other tidbits from the market than she was at cooking them.

While hiding out in the French countryside, the cook at the chateau where she worked taught her the basics of French cooking, but her American customers had more basic tastes.

The sun was low in the sky when Sara and Henrietta carried warm trays of fried chicken,

roasted potatoes and bread from the cookhouse to the kitchen, where they separated the portions onto plates for themselves and their guests. Most of the time, her guests ate a large meal at midday, usually at one of the many public houses in the city, so in the evening, the fare was usually something simple and light like salted meats, cheeses and bread. But Mr. Oliver and his valet hadn't had time for a large meal earlier in the day and they would be hungry now. In addition to the main course, a freshly baked shoofly pie was cooling on a shelf by the stove, next to a pitcher of fresh ale.

When she was satisfied with the presentation, they transferred the meal to the dining room and Hennie went to fetch their guest from the downstairs parlor. Since only the four of them would be dining, Sara had decided to seat everyone at the big table in the dining room instead of having the servants eat in the kitchen as they normally would.

As Henrietta led the two men into the spacious dining room, Sara noted that the clean and well-dressed version of John Oliver was a decided improvement over the version she had greeted in the hallway two hours earlier. His brown hair was clean now and brushed back behind his ears from a part in the middle of his crown, where it was tied into a neat pony tail at the top of his neck. He wore a clean white shirt beneath a buttoned tan waistcoat, with clean white breeches and no topcoat. The heavy riding boots from earlier were replaced by black shoes with a large gold buckle and white stockings. He wasn't truly handsome, but pleasant enough with bright hazel eyes set above high cheekbones on a narrow face.

"I hope you don't mind, Mr. Oliver," Sara said. "I've set the table for the servants to join us for supper rather than eat in the kitchen."

"Of course not," Oliver said. "I have shared many a meal with Ned, and Miss Washington seems a delight."

They arranged themselves at one end of the large table, John Oliver and Ned Foster on one side, and Sara and Hennie on the other. Henrietta poured four mugs of the ale and passed them around. Then Sara said, "We don't usually do any blessing of the food, Mr. Oliver, but if you wish to, please go ahead."

"To be honest, I'm not a churchman," Oliver said.

"Well, that's fine by me," Sara assured him. In fact, the last religious man she had known was Father O'Malley, and he had helped her father sell her to the English pig, Alfred Carlisle. "You must be starved so enjoy your supper, it's Hennie's famous island fried chicken."

Chapter 4

John Oliver was certainly hungry when he and Ned Foster followed the tiny black woman from the salon to the dining room. They'd had a cup of campfire coffee and some stale bread courtesy of the blacksmith before they'd ridden out of Trenton shortly after dawn. Along the road, a farmer had offered some bread and cheese, along with cups of bitter tea. In the war, he'd learned to go days without a real meal when it was necessary, but that was years ago and now a good meal was the cornerstone of good day.

The vision of the food on the table and the smell of fresh bread and seasoned chicken had almost made Oliver dizzy as he pulled a chair back from the table. Mrs. Sullivan said something about the servants joining them at the table and Oliver was fine with that. In fact, he would have sat down with George III himself, and laughed at his bad jokes, if it meant he could start eating.

Then she had mentioned skipping any premeal praying and that was fine, too. Before Sir William took Betsy and young Caleb away to England, they had frequently attended the Methodist Church in Hartford, or the Anglican Church when they were in New York. But since then, his interest in organized religion had waned and he hadn't attended a service in years.

Oliver took his eyes off the victuals and realized Mrs. Sullivan was staring at him. She looked away quickly when she realized he'd noticed her gaze. Since Betsy left, he'd mostly avoided potentially romantic situations with women. At first, he'd believed his wife would return once the war was over, but years past with no response to his many letters.

Over three years had passed since the formal treaty ending hostilities was signed in Paris and he knew Betsy would never return. Perhaps, some day, he would trust a woman again, but he wasn't ready for that yet. He was curious about Mrs. Sullivan, though. There was no denying she was a beautiful woman. Her red hair caught the light from the candles at each end of the table and reflected it back brighter than the original source. It framed her flawless face with bright ringlets that were cinched together below her cheekbones and rested beautifully on her chest, accentuating the play of light and shadow between the curved tops of her breast and the cleavage between them.

Now, it was her turn to catch him staring. He felt his face flush as he spun his head back to the plate in front of him and stabbed at a potato with his fork, a utensil he was not particularly accustomed to, but found quite useful.

"It's all delicious," Oliver said, between bites. "I must have the recipe for the chicken."

"Do you cook, Mr. Oliver?" Mrs. Sullivan asked.

"On occasion," Oliver said. "I enjoy it."

"In France, a lot of men cook."

John Oliver noted that the pile of fried chicken on the platter in the center of the table was disappearing fast. As far as he could tell, Mrs. Sullivan had eaten a single piece, and her cook, Henrietta, was still picking at her first one. He had finished two and begun a third

himself, which meant Ned Foster had devoured at least four pieces.

“I think Ned really likes the chicken,” he said to Henrietta.

“Is good to see a mon eat like dat,” the old woman said in her island style.

Oliver turned to Sara Sullivan and said, “When were you in France, Mrs. Sullivan?” he asked her.

“A few years ago,” she answered. “It was during the war.”

“You must have been quite young,” Oliver observed.

“I was eighteen when I arrived in France.”

“You were lucky to be away from the war,” Oliver said.

“I grew up in Ireland, Mr. Oliver. The war meant little to me at the time, although I hated the English as much as you did.”

“When did you arrive in Philadelphia?” John Oliver asked.

“September 1783.”

Oliver glanced around the spacious dining room, “It appears you have done quite well in our new nation,” he observed. “It couldn’t have been easy for a young *widow* to make her way.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he feared he had overstepped. He’d emphasized the word “widow”, hoping she would elaborate as to what had become of Mr. Sullivan.

“I was fortunate to find an honest and reliable agent to help me along,” she said. Apparently, there would be no enlightenment on the fate of Mr. Sullivan. *It’s none of my business, anyway*, Oliver thought, yet his curiosity only increased.

“You were lucky,” Oliver agreed. “The country was in disarray then, no real currency or court system. I suppose it isn’t much better now, and that’s why we are here to make a new nation.”

“I wish you great success in your efforts, Mr. Oliver,” Mrs. Sullivan said.

“I wish I could be more optimistic, but I am afraid the slavery issue will be a very difficult one to get passed.”

“Surely everyone understands the practice of slavery is contemptuous,” Mrs. Sullivan observed.

“They may understand that it’s contemptuous, Mrs. Sullivan,” Oliver offered, “but that doesn’t mean they will give it up. Their fortunes are invested in human beings, and their leaders, both political and religious, tell them there is nothing wrong with the practice.”

“I understand your meaning, Mr. Oliver,” Mrs. Sullivan said. “I came here from Martinique where slaves die in the cane fields every day.”

“Perhaps it’s a less brutal proposition in our nation,” Oliver said. “Perhaps not.”

“I have seen very few slaves in Philadelphia.”

“There is little profit to owning slaves in a city such as Philadelphia,” Oliver observed. “It is in the southern states where the practice is so rewarding to its proponents.”

“Does everyone in the south own slaves?” Mrs. Sullivan asked.

“No, but the powerful landowners do, and they control the territory like feudal lords

might have done in old England.”

“I have some experience with the English and their manor of owning things,” Mrs. Sullivan said. “In my home country, ordinary people are little more fortunate than slaves.”

“I have heard stories of English brutality in Ireland and in Scotland,” Oliver acknowledged. “Perhaps one day, the Irish will throw them off, as we have.”

“You speak as if you have done great things, Mr. Oliver,” Sara Sullivan said, “but is anyone better off. Slaves are still slaves. Farmers must still hope for rain. Merchants still need customers. Was anything accomplished?”

“Yes,” Oliver said. “Whether brilliant, or whether fools, at least we draw our own path forward.” Oliver leaned back and smiled at the young lady across the table from him. She had drawn him into a much more complex conversation than he had expected, and he was exhilarated by it.

Chapter 5

May 23, 1787

Off the Coast of Maryland

Susannah watched quietly as Hugh Marlow's breathing changed from rapid and uneven to smooth and soft. Then, it changed again as a muffled snore sounded at the end of each exhalation. She knew the snores would get louder soon, and that Marlow would sleep hard for three or four hours.

She looked around the small cabin and did a mental inventory of all the things she could have used to kill Hugh Marlow if Simon wasn't watching from a chair leaned against the port side hull of the small coastal schooner. Simon would kill her the instant she reached for the meat knife that had come on the tray with Marlow's supper, or the heavy candlestick beside it.

She didn't know who she hated more, Simon or Marlow. Simon was a slave, too, but, for reasons she now understood, he was fiercely loyal to Marlow, and Marlow was just as loyal to Simon, who had become his de facto slave master. The one hundred or so other slaves on Marlow's indigo and rice plantation feared Simon as much as they feared any of their white bosses.

Susannah had lived all her twenty-two years at Hallow Hill. At least, she believed she was twenty-two. Her mother told her she was fifteen the year her father died from wasting sickness. The next summer, Hugh Marlow traded her mother and sister to a neighboring plantation owner in exchange for Simon. Six summers had passed since then and Susannah never saw her mother or sister again.

In those six years, Susannah had grown to be a beautiful young woman. She was petite and slim, but strong, like her father had been. But she had her mother's lighter skin, green eyes, and deep brown hair. By the time she was seventeen, her body had taken a shape that drew the eyes of men in such a way that made her self-conscious. The white men on the plantation took notice of her, as well. Hugh Marlow had taken notice, too, and brought her into the manor house to live and work.

She grimaced at the thought of Hallow Hill. Why had Marlow named the place that anyway? There were no hills anywhere on the place, or anyplace else in the low-country as far as she knew. Much of the land was wet for a good portion of the year, making it an inviting home for alligators, snakes, and dangerous wild hogs.

Until three days before, Susannah had never been further from Hallow Hill than Charleston, about fifteen miles from the plantation. She'd heard of Philadelphia but didn't know where it was. Since they were traveling by boat, she assumed it must be an island. In any event, it wasn't part of South Carolina.

She was sick the entire first day after they left Charleston harbor, but Marlow didn't care. He still expected to have his legs and feet massaged with warm oils. That was the reason he insisted Susannah come along. She was still young and pretty, but Marlow didn't

care about that anymore. Not very often anyway. Now, he just wanted relief for his arthritis and gout.

She shuddered thinking about the times Marlow had raped her. The law wouldn't call it rape because Susannah was Marlow's property. He could do what he wanted with her. But Susannah knew she was violated. Being owned, knowing she couldn't resist didn't matter. It was rape.

Maybe those days are over for good, she thought. The last time was more than four months past now. He'd called her to him a couple of times, but nothing happened when his flaccid tool wouldn't respond. But even then she felt violated. In her mind, she would never be this man's property.

She felt Simon's hand squeeze her bicep and brought her mind back to the present situation. "Time to go, girl," Simon said. He squeezed her arm again and directed her toward the door to the small cabin connected to Marlow's. Susannah said nothing as he guided her through the door and locked it behind them.

The tiny compartment barely afforded room for two narrow cots and a privy bucket the both of them used. Susannah was accustomed to having little privacy, but Simon's close proximity made her particularly uncomfortable. He was an imposing man. The top of her head was barely even with his shoulders, which were broader than any man she'd ever seen. She didn't know his age, but assumed he was a few years older than herself.

Simon slipped the key into the pocket of his dirty white shirt, which was open to the waist where it was tucked into equally dirty brown breeches cinched at the waistband with a thin rope. He wasn't skinny like most of the other slaves but was well-fed and fit. He skin was lighter, too, not having to spend day-after-day in the broiling heat of the fields.

"You best sleep now, girl," Simon said to her. "We gon' get to that Philadelphia place tomorrow mornin'." He smiled at her, showing two rows of even, white teeth.

She'd seen the smile many times before. She knew it wasn't meant in friendship or kindness, but still the smile could be disarming. When Simon had first arrived at Hallow Hill, most of the young girls on the plantation had advertised their interest in him, but he'd shown no interest in return. Then, a couple of weeks later, an injured young boy had crawled home to his cabin. The boy wouldn't say what happened to him, but others had seen him with Simon earlier. Now, it was well known that Marlow kept one or two young boys at the main house to entertain Simon in exchange for his insuring that the other slaves weren't planning a revolt.

"You know anythin' 'bout Phil'delphia, Simon?" Susannah asked. She hated Simon and usually avoided conversation.

"Nope," he responded.

"Why we goin' dar?"

"Mr. Marlow say it's a big important meetin'. Theys men coming from all over goin' to make some new laws."

"Them laws ain't gon' mean nothin' to us," Susannah commented. "So, whys I goin' to Phil'delphia?"

“You gon’ rub Mr. Marlow’s feet when he want you to,” Simon said. “You gon’ do whatever else he want, too.”

“And you goin’ along to make sure I do what he want?”

“Mr. Marlow, he like you, girl, but he don’t trust you none,” Simon said. “I don’t trust you none, either, so I be keepin’ close watch on you.”

Susannah lowered her eyes and sighed, then glanced toward the privy pot. “You mind not watchin’ whilst I use the pot?” she asked.

“I don’t care nothin’ about watchin’ a girl pee,” Simon said, “but like I says, I don’t trust you none.”

She lifted the well-worn dress Marlow had given her before they left Hallow Hill and squatted over the pot. She stared at Simon, who never looked away while she relieved herself.

May 24, 1787

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Susannah shielded her eyes from the early afternoon sun with her right hand and watched as the schooner’s crew lashed the vessel to a sturdy wooden pier. Beyond the pier, laborers pushed heavily loaded carts between the long row of ships tied up to the quay and the long, narrow buildings that fronted the piers. Other men loaded cargo onto mule-drawn wagons waiting to haul it into the city beyond the yard.

“Theys all white men workin’ here,” she said to Simon. She hadn’t meant to say it aloud, but her astonishment overwhelmed her caution. She’d seen white men doing hard labor before, but it was certainly uncommon in the low-country.

“Mr. Marlow say they ain’t got many slaves in these parts. White folks got to do the work.”

“Them white folks must be mad about that. I bet they want some slaves to do that work for ‘em.”

“No,” Simon said. “I been talkin’ to Mr. Marlow this mornin. He say they don’t want nobody to have slaves.”

“Well, I think I like Phil’delphia,” Susannah said, peering beyond the dockyard. From what she could see so far, Philadelphia was certainly very different from South Carolina.

“Don’t get no ideas ‘bout runnin’ off,” Simon warned. “I got my eyes on you.” Simon was again the loathsome creature she knew him to be.

Beyond the row of warehouses, she could see a busy cobblestone avenue lined with two-story wooden buildings. Most of the structures looked as if they needed a fresh coat of paint, or at least a bucket of water and some soap. The only other large city Susannah had seen was Charleston, where majestic brick and stone mansions overlooked the harbor.

Closer to the schooner, she saw Marlow on the wide wooden pier. He was speaking to

a young man in a stylish waistcoat with matching breeches, clearly not one of the dockworkers she'd been observing. The man pointed toward a carriage and Marlow nodded in agreement. A few seconds later, she saw two of the dockworkers loading Marlow's heavy trunks into the back of the carriage.

The carriage was a simple wagon with one wooden bench near the front and an open deck behind it where the luggage had been loaded. Marlow sat on the bench beside the young man who had met them on the dock and Susannah and Simon sat on the trunks in the back. The cobblestones beneath the wheels caused the solid wooden axles to continually bounce up and down.

A short distance from the dock, Susannah saw an encampment of makeshift tents and huts set up on the opposite bank of a small creek. Three black men and a woman milled about outside the tents. Marlow and Simon saw them also.

"Those are freedmen," Marlow turned around and said to Susannah. "In case you get ideas, take a good look at 'em. They ain't no better off than slaves."

Susannah said nothing but looked at the freedmen again. Marlow couldn't know if they were better off or not. He wouldn't understand the difference between being owned and being free.

As the wagon traveled further from the dock, the homes and buildings got statelier and more impressive. Gardens were better maintained, recent paint on buildings, finely dressed ladies walking beside the street. Even the roadway was smoother, sand having been spread to even out the rough cobblestones.

Finally, the carriage made a turn to the right and proceeded along a broad avenue lined by Oak and Elm trees. In some places, the residential look of the buildings gave way to large red brick structures that reminded Susannah of the banks and society halls she's seen in Charleston.

After two more turns, the little wagon stopped in front of a large, three story wooden house. It was well-maintained with a front garden bursting with spring flowers. A broad front porch shaded the white exterior of the first level. Two large rocking chairs hinted at the comfort to be found within the house. A wooden sign stood beside the street. Susannah tried to remember the letters her mother had taught her years before. S...U...L. She recognized a N, an H and another U.