

Chapter 39b

February 6, 1818, Strawberry Plain

“It’s wonderful to have you back, Charlotte,” Emily said as she poured hot liquid from the pot into teacups. “Armie has missed you so. We all have.”

“And how I missed all of you! I was so weary of waiting for the snow and ice to thaw and for the roads to become passable again.”

“You are feeling better, yes?” Emily asked, placing the pot on an ornate silver tray.

“So much better,” Charlotte said, spooning a bit of cream into the hot brew. She narrowed her eyes and watched the cream dissipate and cloud the tea.

“Charlotte?” Emily said, taking the pitcher from her sister-in-law.

Charlotte looked up and bit her lip. “I have nowhere to turn, Em.”

Emily knitted her brows together. “What is it, sweetie?”

Moving her eyes to the cup in her hands, Charlotte organized her thoughts to explain the reason for her impromptu visit to Strawberry Plain.

“It’s Armistead. He’s not been himself since I returned, and . . .” Charlotte paused and drew a heavy sigh.

“I know, honey. We’ve all seen it in him these past few months. But now that you’re back, he is sure to be his old self soon enough. There is no need for worry, I promise.” Emily reached over and patted Charlotte’s hand.

“Yes, that’s what I thought, too. That his peculiarities would pass in a day or two. But he is completely distracted and indifferent—almost cold at times—not warm and thoughtful like we both know him to be. So when he left this morning, I went into his library and started reading through his correspondence—”

Emily interrupted. “I read William’s mail every chance I get. Gotta keep an eye on your man, you know!”

Charlotte offered a faint smile, trying not to lose her train of thought. “Armistead has been feuding with Mr. Mercer for a long time now, and, since the election, their dispute has escalated. I had little concern over the matter, because Mr. Mercer . . . well, there was no need for me to worry. But this morning I stumbled across communications that are of grave concern, Emily. And I am terribly worried.” Charlotte’s eyes drifted back to the cup in her hand.

A combination of confusion and astonishment engulfed Emily’s face. “Wait a minute. A feud with Mr. Mercer? Charles Fenton Mercer?”

“Yes. Mr. Mercer of Aldie. He and Armistead have been in the midst of a dispute for nearly two years now. But, as everyone knows, Mr. Mercer is not a man to engage in a fight. As for William’s hotheaded brother, well now, that’s entirely another matter.”

“Hotheaded brother? Are you referring to Jack?”

“Yes, Emily. And the controversy between Jack and your brother has escalated to the point that Armistead has threatened to fight him.”

“To fight him? You mean a duel?” Emily put the cup back on the saucer, her eyes wide.

“It seems so.”

“Why on earth would Armie want to fight Jack?”

“I’m not sure. All I know is that Armistead and Jack called each other very terrible names. But the thought of losing my husband, and the dreadful storm the family would weather should both Armistead and Jack perish in such a fight . . .” Charlotte shuddered at the thought.

“Charlotte, please do not allow yourself to worry so. You are still recovering, and such stress is not good for you.” Emily shook her head. “These men and their obsession with politics!”

“It’s more about their honor than politics, Em. You know how they defend it so.”

Emily bit at her lower lip. “I will at once talk to Armie about all of this. In fact, I spoke to him last year at your wedding, asking him to forgive Jack for the incident at the hustings. I don’t know why he would go back on his word. Unless—” Emily paused, seeming to lose her train of thought.

“Unless what?”

“Unless Jack did something stupid. As much as I love my brother-in-law, he can be so obtuse at times! I’m sure that’s what happened. Armie would never not honor his word! And I will remind him of just that when I speak to him! Like Father always said, ‘A Mason’s word is a bond that can never be broken!’”

“Oh no, Emily. Should you bring this up directly to him, Armistead surely will know it came from me. He would be terribly upset if he thought that the two of us were meddling in his affairs.”

Emily nodded her head in agreement with Charlotte. “How they hate when we interfere! What do you suggest we do?”

“Well, I am certain that my husband doesn’t want to fight, but he will, should Mr. McCarty issue the challenge or pursue the matter further.”

“I will talk to William then, or to Jack directly somehow, because Jack doesn’t always listen to William.”

Charlotte breathed a sigh of relief. “I think that is a much better idea.”