

Chapter 6b

“So, Charlotte,” Sally McCarty said, smiling with some of the red wax from her lips now on her teeth. “You must tell us all about your romance with Armistead! I just love a good romance story. Makes my heart all warm and takes me back to when I first met my beloved Daniel.”

“There’s not much to tell, ma’am.” Charlotte smiled as her attention drifted to the doorway. Many of the guests had left the dining room already. Charlotte had remained at the table with her sister, Sarah, and brother-in-law, Dr. Charles Cocke, all of whom were overnighing at Selma, Armistead’s neighboring plantation. Sitting across from her were the McCartys—Sally and her children, Nancy, Thomson, and Edgar, and Edgar’s wife, Peggy. Charlotte looked anxiously out the doorway for Armistead as Sally McCarty continued her nattering.

“Oh, now, of course there is! Come, come, Miss Charlotte. Humor an old lady’s fantasies! Now, how did you and Armistead meet?” Charlotte sighed at Sally’s insistence. There was no way to avoid her.

“It was the summer before the war, June of ’11, just after I moved to Esmont with my sister,” Charlotte said sweetly to mask her discomfort.

“Yes,” Sarah piped in. “Dr. Cocke and I were intent on finding an appropriate suitor for her, but she was so particular! We introduced her to I don’t know how many gentlemen before she was swept off her feet by Armistead.”

“Before the war?” Sally tilted her head with a puzzled look on her face. “Wasn’t Armistead married to Eliza before the war?”

Charlotte forced a smile as butterflies took flight in her stomach. “It was actually Stevens, Armistead’s brother, who Sarah and Charles had intended for me to court. Armistead had accompanied Stevens the summer when Charles introduced us. It wasn’t until after his wife’s death, after the war, that Armistead captured my heart.” *Liar!* said a voice in Charlotte’s head.

In her mind’s eye, Charlotte recalled that summer afternoon before the last war. It had been unusually hot for June. She was at the piano in the parlor with the windows opened when she heard their coach on the carriageway. She continued playing, completely losing herself in the music. When she looked up from the keys, the two brothers were standing at the doorway. Although both men were dark, with striking good looks, it was Armistead whom she noticed. He was the taller of the two and had an indescribable aura about him. As she greeted the two brothers, she was overwhelmed with such nervousness that she found it difficult to catch her breath and even harder to find words. “Charlotte” was all she could say as Armistead took her hand. His eyes were intense. Dark as peat, with a black fire burning behind them that ignited something deep inside her. It was that day, long before his wife had died, that Armistead Mason had captured her heart.

Sally McCarty was asking Charlotte something else when her mind drifted back to the conversation at the table. “I’m sorry,” Charlotte said. “Come again?”

“I was asking about Stevens. How long had you courted before he died?” Sally repeated.

“I was never in courtship with Stevens, ma’am. We were just friends,” Charlotte said. “It was only after the war ended that my relations with Armistead became romantic.” *Liar! Liar!*

“How grief-stricken Armistead was at Stevens’s death,” Sarah said in an effort to divert Sally’s attention from her sister.

“There is no pain like the pain of losing a brother,” said Sally. “My sons, having lost six, know that. Except, of course, the pain of losing a child. And poor Armistead lost a brother, a wife, and a child, all in such a short period of time. How terrible it has been for the Masons of Raspberry Plain.” A sad expression came over Sally’s face as she took another drink of wine from her glass.

“Let’s not dampen the mood with all this talk of death, Sally,” said Edgar. “It is an engagement celebration, after all!”

“And Charlotte’s birthday!” said Charles.

“Heavens! I had heard that rumor!” Sally said, raising her glass. “Happy birthday! And forgive an old lady for prying so. To be young again!”

Charlotte was growing more than weary of the “old lady” across from her and was desperate for a change of scenery.

“If you would be so kind as to excuse me,” Charlotte said, pushing back from her chair and standing. “I just remembered that I promised Armistead to meet him in the parlor.”

“I will come with you,” Sarah said as she stood with her sister, “and fetch a refill of that punch for myself and Dr. Cocke. Gentlemen. Ladies. If you would excuse us.”

Mrs. McCarty seemed taken aback by their abruptness, but Charlotte didn’t care.

The two sisters, arm in arm in velvet gowns, left the dining room for the hubbub of the hall. Men were laughing heartily, enjoying the grog and whiskey, while the women were gossiping in loud whispers in order to be heard above the noise of the crowd.

Charlotte glanced around for Armistead, but failed to find him.

“I’m sorry for that, Charlotte,” said Sarah. “That old biddy had no right to pry into your affairs and judge you like that!”

“It’s all right. She meant no harm. I have only God to answer to and, as I see it, I have no reason to worry.” *Liar!* There was that voice again, reminding her of her selfishness.

When Charlotte had first met Armistead, it was no secret that he was a married man. At the time, she hadn’t cared because he made her feel special. He was strong and alive and had a grand ambition that nourished her own. With each of his visits to Esmont, their friendship had grown, along with their secret love. Then the war came. And then that day, just after her twenty-third birthday, when she heard the news that Armistead’s wife, Eliza, had died from a complication of pregnancy and that the baby, too, had been lost. At first Charlotte felt betrayed—he had not told her that Eliza was pregnant—but those feelings were quickly replaced with hope and joy. Now Armistead could be hers and hers alone. It was this selfishness that she would one day have to answer for to God.

Charlotte shuddered at the thought. “Do you see Armistead anywhere?” she asked Sarah. “I don’t want him to miss the first dance.”

“I don’t, but you shouldn’t worry, Charlotte. He knows how you love to dance and wouldn’t disappoint you for the world.” Charlotte nodded as her eyes darted about the room.

“Charlotte, there is no reason to be so anxious. He’ll come find you soon enough.”

“All I have is anxiety when I’m not with him. You know how I am.”

“It’s young love.” Sarah winked with a knowing smile. “That’s all. And it will pass after you’ve been married a few years. Then you’ll be eager to have him disappear into his study with his friends.”

Charlotte glanced again toward the rear of the hall. “Doubtful.”

Sarah sighed as she waved her sister off. “All right. Go check on him. I’ll meet up with you later in the parlor.”

“Thank you, sister. I won’t be long, I promise!”