

The
SMUGGLER'S
GAMBIT



SARA WHITFORD

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The Smuggler's Gambit

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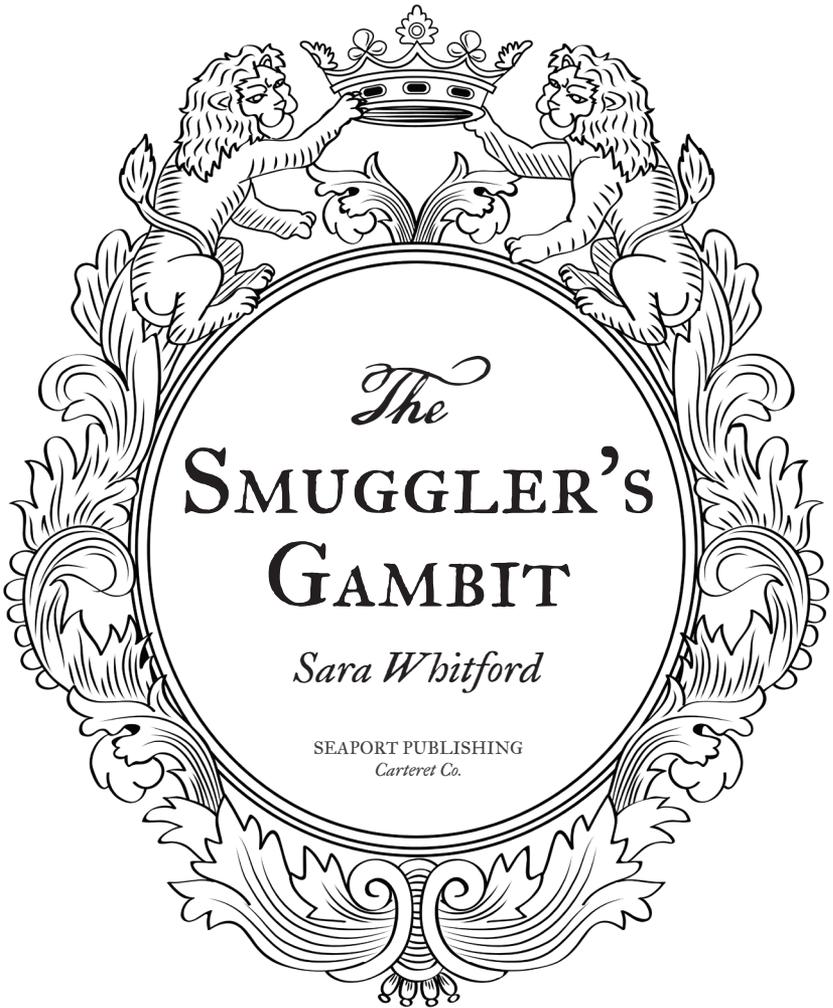


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TO ISAAC

*You are my greatest inspiration and
my most enthusiastic encourager.
I hope you enjoy this story.*

LOVE,
MOM



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Sara Whitford

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gam-bit noun \`gam-bət\

—a planned series of moves at the beginning of a game of chess

—something done or said in order to gain an advantage or to produce a desired result

Full Definition of GAMBIT

1. a chess opening in which a player risks one or more pawns or a minor piece to gain an advantage in position
2. a. a remark intended to start a conversation or make a telling point
b. a calculated move

(From Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary)

PROLOGUE

ADAM TWISTED UP his nose. He wiggled his cheeks. He contorted his face every way he could to scratch the left side of his nose just below his eye, but it was no use. A torn bit of fabric from the blindfold that was tied around his head was flapping loose in the wind and, irritatingly, brushing against his skin with every gust.

Of course it would've been easier if his hands weren't tightly bound behind his back. To make matters worse, there was that cord tied around his lower legs from his knees down to his ankles. In fact, he could feel that it was cutting off the blood flow to his feet.

Oh well, thought Adam, *at least I'm not vomiting.* That answered a question he'd always wondered about—whether or not he had sea legs. Then again, maybe it was just because the cutter on which he was being held captive was slicing through

the water at top speeds, thanks to fair winds and following seas.

If only he could tell which way they were going. As it was, he had no idea. Everything had happened so fast. First, two ruffians forced him into their boat at the tip of a knife. Then, as soon as they had gotten him out of clear sight of the town, Lot, the oaf-like, stringy-haired one tied up Adam's limbs and blindfolded him while Ajax—the shorter goon, who had a heavily scarred face—sadistically dug the knife deeper into Adam's side.

He understandably had a hard time concentrating in the midst of all of the confusion. It was enough of a challenge trying to be compliant while contorting his spine so as not to accidentally end up with a blade in his back. Trying to get some sense of direction from the jerky movements of the boat at that same time would've been impossible. Adam could detect that the men had intentionally made the boat take some unnecessary turns so that he'd be thoroughly confused about their course.

After what felt like hours, he felt the bottom of the boat scraping along sand. They had come to land, but where were they?

Oh God, he thought. *Don't let them leave me in the middle of nowhere.* Adam's heart was pounding. He realized what they were about to do, and he knew why. He had said too much back at the warehouse. He should have never asked Rasquelle about those barrels in that locked room. Now Rasquelle was dealing with the threat of Adam's knowledge as quickly and quietly as possible.

The two men jerked Adam out of the boat and tossed him onto the shore. He was still blindfolded, and his hands and feet were still tied.

"What are you doing?" Adam shouted. "You can't just leave me here!"

"Just watch us!" Lot replied. "Oh, wait. You can't. You're

blindfolded." He cackled sadistically.

"We don't ask no questions," said Ajax. "We take our orders from the boss. He wanted us to get rid of you, and this seems like a right good way to do it."

Adam tried to work his way up to kneel, but one of them came over and kicked him hard so that he fell back down.

"If you're just going to leave me here, this is murder. You're committing murder!"

"No. I ain't stickin you with this knife," countered Ajax. "I'm just leavin you here. I ain't takin your life. God can save you if he feels like it."

"That's right, boy," said Lot. "We ain't murderers. The Almighty might save you, but if he don't, that'll be his decision, won't it? Guess that'll tell you what he thinks about you."

"I know why you're doing this!" said Adam. "But it's not necessary. I won't be a problem. I won't say anything. Please just take me back! Or drop me off at any port—I don't care!"

"We are dropping you off—right here," said Ajax.

"And don't start thinking you're going to ever make it back," said Lot. "If you could see where we were leavin you, you'd know there's nowhere for you to go."

"That's right," said Ajax. "We're hours from Beaufort. Speakin of which, we better be gettin back. And by the way, you'll want to try to wiggle back a bit. Looks like the tide's comin in."

Chapter One

ALL EYES TURNED to Adam Fletcher when he entered the dining area of the Topsail Tavern.

“My, my! Doesn’t he look handsome?” Mary Fletcher exclaimed as her son held his arms out to the sides and gave a proud turnabout.

“It’s amazing what a waistcoat, coat, and dress shoes can do,” said Valentine. “You look like a proper gentleman.”

Adam smiled broadly. His brown eyes glistened. He was even more handsome than usual, with his face clean-shaven and his dark, wavy hair pulled back.

“Go on and have a good time,” said Mary. She started to walk Adam to the door before she abruptly stopped him. “Wait a minute!” She grabbed his coat sleeves one at a time and adjusted them. Adam was a bit taller than Valentine, whose dress clothes he had borrowed, so the sleeves were a little short. Because they

were cuffed, it wasn't hard to bring their lengths down a bit by moving the folds.

As soon as she had him adjusted, he was out the door.

Adam met up with Jackson, a busboy who also worked at the tavern, in front of Jackson's house. They walked the mile to the estate of Richard Rasquelle, a young, successful shipping merchant who was hosting a party for the town, and were impressed before they had even set foot on the property.

The sound of harpsichord music drifted across the lawn. A footman stood at the front gate, instructing partygoers where they should go. The event was already fancier than anything the boys had ever attended.

As Adam and Jackson followed the long walking trail across the lawn and around the house, they were excitedly anticipating what the party would be like. They were not disappointed when they finally reached the back garden, where they found more people than they'd ever seen gathered in one place in their tiny seaport town.

Everyone was wearing their best. In some cases, that meant church clothes, but the wealthier citizens wore finery imported from London and Paris.

"Look at all these people," said Adam.

The boys studied the crowd.

"Ho there! Attendant!"

Someone had tapped on Adam's shoulder. He spun around to see his nemesis standing there before him. Francis Smythe was a spindly young man about his age. He was wearing a curled, blond wig with a tricorn hat and a fancy powder-blue suit.

"Fetch me a drink, would you? And some hors d'oeuvres," Smythe snidely demanded.

"Go get 'em yourself, Smythe," said Adam.

“We’re not working here today,” said Jackson in an attempt to smooth over his friend’s coarse manners.

“Oh really?” chuckled Smythe. “With what you’re wearing, I’d assumed you were the hired help. I mean, why else would you be here?”

Adam rolled his eyes. He wasn’t going to dignify Smythe’s comment with a response.

But apparently Jackson didn’t mind answering his question. “The whole town was invited. I reckon near ’bout everybody’s here.”

“Ha ha. Of course,” said Smythe. “You lads would never merit a proper invitation if this were a private party.”

“Why are you here, Francis?” asked Adam. “On your daddy’s business, I reckon.”

“My father is traveling. I came in his stead.”

Adam scoffed. “Really? I’d think it might be a conflict of interest, you coming to fraternize with a shipping merchant, what with your father being who he is and all.”

Francis hesitated for a moment before he responded. “We like to keep an eye on things.”

“Uh-huh,” said Adam. “Whatever you say.”

“Well, since you boys are probably bewildered at a social function, just watch me. Do as I do and maybe you won’t embarrass yourselves too much.” At that, Smythe tipped his hat and made his way into the crowd.

“What an ass!” said Adam under his breath.

“Just ignore him,” said Jackson. “You know he’s only trying to egg you on.”

The two of them resumed looking around to see if there was anyone else they knew among the partygoers.

“Who is she?” Jackson exclaimed as he tilted his head in

the direction of an arbor that was covered in climbing roses.

Adam scanned the crowd in that general direction until his eyes fell upon a young lady with honey-blond hair. She was wearing an ivory gown embroidered with pink roses. An older man and woman were conversing with her, motioning at her dress and the arbor, probably commenting on the similarity between the blossoms on the arbor and those on her gown. Adam guessed the girl was about his age. He wondered if she was from out of town—at least he knew he had never seen her before. He would certainly have remembered if he had.

Her hair was put up in the most intricate style Adam had ever seen. It was something that must have been done with the help of one or more servants. Her eyes sparkled in the sun, and once he'd caught sight of her, he couldn't look away.

Suddenly the girl happened to glance over in his direction. She caught him gazing at her and quickly looked away. He, on the other hand, was not embarrassed and made no attempt to hide his interest.

One thing Adam Fletcher did not lack was confidence.

"I'm gonna go talk to her," he said to his friend.

Jackson's jaw dropped. "No, you're not! You can't go up to her! She doesn't even know you!"

"She's about to." Adam grinned, then slapped his buddy on the back and walked away.

He strode across the garden toward the young lady. As he neared the arbor where she was chatting with the elderly couple, he grabbed two glasses of punch from a silver tray that was being held by one of Rasquelle's servants.

Adam threw a quick glance back at Jackson, who stood with his mouth agape as he watched his friend approach this group of people, who were well above the two of them in social

standing. Adam stopped short before he interrupted the trio.

“Pardon me, sir,” he said to the old man. “I hope you don’t mind, but the sun is so bright and these two ladies looked as if they could use a bit of refreshment. Do you mind if I offer them some punch?”

The gentleman, already cheerfully intoxicated, smiled and took a step back and said, “Certainly not, my boy! Very kind of you. Very kind.”

Adam first offered a glass of punch to the old man’s wife, then offered the young lady a glass, along with a little bow.

“My lady,” he said.

The girl demurred as she smiled and accepted the glass.

“What a gentleman,” remarked the old woman.

“Indeed,” said her husband. “What is your name, boy?”

“Adam Fletcher, sir.”

Although Adam was answering the old man’s questions, his eyes kept coyly darting back to the young lady.

“I’m Reginald Farrington, Esquire, and this is my wife, Martha.”

“How do you do, ma’am?” said Adam, bowing his head.

“Very well, thank you. Mr. Fletcher, you said it was?” said Martha.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Mr. Farrington then motioned to the young woman. “And may I introduce you to Miss Rocksolanah Martin?”

“Miss Martin,” Adam cooed as he bowed his head. “I’m delighted to meet you. How do you do, m’lady?”

“I’m quite well, thank you.” She gave him the obligatory cordial smile and kept her eyes fixed on the crowd, careful to avoid his gaze.

The old man chuckled and said, “Yes, well, my wife and

I were just observing that the roses on this arbor are exactly like the ones—”

Just then a bell was rung from a little stage that had been fashioned on the other side of the garden, and a man at a podium called out to the crowd, “My dear ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention, please?”

The crowd’s murmuring died down, and all eyes turned toward the stage.

The man continued: “Ladies and gentlemen of Port Beaufort, I am delighted to be here with you today, at the request of Mr. Richard Rasquelle, to celebrate his successful start in this town and a promising future.”

Some of the audience cheered and offered applause. Others just listened.

“You were all invited here today because Mr. Rasquelle attributes his success to the good people of this town, and on this occasion he wanted to express his gratitude with a bit of fine food and entertainment.” The man motioned to the long table set up on the opposite side of the garden near the arbor and then to the musicians, who quickly played a few bars of an upbeat tune.

“Now, I’m assuming you all know me—at least, if you’re from Beaufort—but if not, my name is Everett Bell, and my family has been here since we ventured down this way from the Pamlico more than a decade ago.”

The Farringtons were speaking to each other in hushed tones. Mrs. Farrington mumbled something unintelligible, then Mr. Farrington said under his breath, “I’ve been here twice as long and I’ve never heard of him.”

Adam smiled at the old couple. “Me neither,” he whispered.

Miss Martin stifled a giggle and said, “Nor have I.”

The man at the podium continued his speech. "And in all the time I've been here, I've never known a gentleman as kind, as generous, and as heroic as Richard Rasquelle. And while you may have heard about his greatest deed in the papers over a year ago, you may not know about the depth and breadth of his goodness."

The crowd was attentive as Mr. Bell continued his speech.

Just then, Francis Smythe came to stand on the other side of Rocksolanah. "Miss Martin," he said, bowing to the young lady. "Mr. and Mrs. Farrington."

Adam clenched his jaw and dug his fingertips into his palms in an effort to restrain himself from saying something ungentlemanly. He knew Smythe had only come over to antagonize him.

"Fletcher," whispered Smythe, "I had no idea you knew these fine people."

Adam furrowed his brow at Smythe, then looked back towards the stage in an effort to ignore him. Smythe gave him a cocky grin and then excused himself from their company. Adam, Miss Martin, and the Farringtons turned their attention back towards the man at the podium.

"This man," said Mr. Bell. He stopped speaking and motioned off the stage to where Rasquelle was standing. Rasquelle bowed his head and raised his hand in a reserved wave to the crowd. Mr. Bell continued: "This man is too humble to publicize his good deeds. Those of you who are newcomers to Port Beaufort, or perhaps visitors, may not have heard about this, but not too long after this honorable gentleman set up shop here, he put himself, his crew, and his cargo vessel, *Fortuna*, at great risk in order to rescue another ship that was sinking not far off our coast. That other vessel, the *Sea Sprite*, was carrying not only valuable merchandise from Europe but, more importantly, the most

priceless cargo—nearly seventy souls, including several women and children, whose lives would have surely been lost had the aptly named *Fortuna* not been able to come to their rescue that day.

“While some of the cargo containers were lost to the tides, more of them were recovered and, most importantly, not a single life was lost. All thanks to the leadership and bravery of this man and his crew.”

The crowd across the garden burst into thunderous applause.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said Mr. Bell, “I’d like to introduce our gracious host, Mr. Richard Rasquelle.”

At that, Rasquelle stepped up onto the stage. He smiled self-assuredly and gazed out affectionately over his garden full of guests before he began to speak.

“Dear friends,” he said, “I don’t know that I can express the deep gratitude I have for all of you who decided to join me here today. And to be honest, we are here because of you. You all have made the success I have enjoyed these last couple of years possible, and I am humbled and most appreciative.”

Everyone began to applaud. A few even whistled and cheered.

“Thank you. Thank you so much,” he said as he gently raised up his hand to silence the crowd. “I do hope you all are enjoying the food, the music, and the fine company of your friends and neighbors. I hope we can have many more days like this in the future—celebrating our success together as a town.”

More applause.

“I’d like to tell you my story, in hopes that for some of you younger fellows, I can perhaps offer a bit of encouragement as you contemplate your futures. I’ll admit I haven’t always lived

in a home like this, or worn finery such as this, or been able to have parties like this one. I wasn't poor by any means, but my upbringing was a rather unremarkable one. Unfortunately, although my father worked hard, he never was able to achieve greatness. He was a follower. He didn't lead. He didn't determine to do whatever was necessary to be successful. One thing I've learned from watching his example—and, granted, he was a good, morally upright man and a kind father, may he rest in peace—is that if you always want to be average, to stay exactly where you are, just continue doing that which you have always done. In his case, it was working as a bookkeeper for a shipping merchant. He never thought he could *be* the shipping merchant, the man in charge. I've learned that if you want excellence—in fact, if you want anything in this life—you have to go after it. You mustn't let anything stand in your way of achieving all that you hope to achieve.”

When Rasquelle finished his speech, the party guests began to clap and cheer once more. Adam noticed that his friend Jackson was now standing near him, but Miss Martin was not. He surveyed the crowd, trying to see where she'd gone, but she was nowhere to be found.

When Reginald Farrington noticed Adam looking around, he said, “If you're looking for Miss Martin, she left a little while ago.”

“Oh?” said Adam. “I didn't even notice her leave.”

“Indeed, she slipped away just as Mr. Rasquelle went up on the platform. Whispered that she had another appointment.”

“What a pity. And we only just met,” said Adam.

Mr. Farrington shook his head. “My wife and I have met her once before, and we were delighted to see her here today, but we didn't chat long before you arrived. I believe the young lady

lives just northeast of here, over 'round Lennoxville Point."

Adam nodded. "I see. Well, I only regret that I was unable to bid her farewell. I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance, however, sir and ma'am."

"The pleasure is all ours," said Reginald. "I noticed you appear to know young Mr. Smythe."

Adam nodded and took a deep breath before he said, "I do, sir," through a forced smile.

"And do you know Mr. Rasquelle personally?" asked Reginald.

"No, sir. Unfortunately, I do not. Although he does occasionally visit our place of employment."

Adam noticed Reginald looking at Jackson when he realized he never bothered to introduce him. "Where are my manners? This is Jackson Willis, a friend and associate."

Jackson extended his hand to Reginald. "How do you do, sir?" He tipped his head slightly to Martha. "Ma'am?"

Martha smiled. Reginald shook hands with Jackson. "Pleased to meet you, young man. So where is it that you two fellows are employed?"

Jackson answered before Adam could say anything. "Oh, we work over at the Topsail Tavern. Well, I should say I work there. Adam and his mother actually live *and* work there."

"Oh, really? What a surprise," said Reginald. "I never would have thought—"

Adam chuckled nervously. "Well, sir, ma'am, we better be going. It was a pleasure to meet the two of you."

"Likewise," said Martha.

"Indeed," said Reginald. "Russell's Tavern is nearer to where we live, so that's where I normally go. But perhaps I'll see you there at the Topsail sometime if I'm over that way."

Adam smiled and nodded. “That would be nice, sir. Hope the two of you enjoy the rest of the party.”

He bowed his head and excused himself, then grabbed Jackson firmly by the arm and led him away from the festivities.

“You idiot!”

“What did I do?” said Jackson.

“You had to say all that about the tavern?”

Adam walked ahead at a brisk pace.

Jackson hurried to catch up. “He asked. There’s nothing wrong with that. We do work there!”

Adam stopped walking. Jackson did the same.

“But you told them my mother and I *live* there!”

Jackson scoffed. “Well, you do live there.”

“They didn’t need to know that!” said Adam. “I was trying to leave a good impression. That man is an attorney. You never know what sort of connections can be made through a man like that. What impression do you think he’ll have knowing I live at a tavern with my mother—no mention of a father?”

“Well, uh. . .” Jackson stammered. “What would you have told him?”

“I simply would have told him that my family runs the Topsail. It’s true, and it sure leaves a better impression than the scant details you chose to share.”

Adam’s eyes were big, and he cocked his head, waiting to see if Jackson would have a response.

Jackson started to speak but could think of nothing to say. He suddenly motioned over to a bench near the entrance. Miss Martin was standing there talking with Francis Smythe. Adam couldn’t believe it. Sure, Smythe was wealthy and the son of a royal appointee—the port’s customs agent—but still, Adam couldn’t understand how a girl like that would have anything to

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talk about with someone like Smythe. He seemed so transparently slimy.

Apparently, Adam's gawking was a little too obvious, because Francis turned his pale blue eyes from the conversation just long enough to offer a smarmy smile and shoot daggers from his pupils at his adversary.

Adam and Jackson left Rasquelle's estate and returned to Front Street in silence.

Chapter Two

THE FRIDAY FOLLOWING Rasquelle's party, Adam was working at the Topsail Tavern, like always, when a group of upper-crust boys came in. And what a surprise. Francis Smythe was with them.

They took one of the tables near a window and sat chatting and laughing until Francis finally shouted in Adam's direction, "Boy! You there!"

Adam had just begun taking an order from another customer. He raised up his finger to Smythe, motioning "just a minute," but otherwise ignored him, determined to finish with his current customer. Then he would try to get somebody else to wait on Smythe's table.

Smythe turned to his buddies and whispered something, prompting them all to laugh before he spoke up again. "Hey, Fletcher, do you think you might wait on us anytime soon? We're

dying of thirst.”

Adam gave an embarrassed smile to his customer and said, “I apologize, sir. One moment please.”

The customer nodded in understanding.

“I’ll be with you as soon as I’m done helping this gentleman,” said Adam, making every effort to not take Smythe’s bait.

“Fine, fine,” said Smythe. “What choice do we have?” He was quiet for a moment and then said loudly to his friends, “I didn’t realize the Topsail Tavern had such slow help!”

Adam glanced over at the bar and tried to motion for Valentine to wait on Smythe’s table, but he had no luck. The tavern keeper shook his head and pointed at Adam, then Smythe’s table, before disappearing into the kitchen.

Adam shrugged and made his way over to the group of young men.

“What can I get you fellas?”

“We’ll each have a pint. Go fetch that first, then we’ll give you our orders.”

Adam nodded. “Fine. I’ll be right back with those.”

Francis was trying to show off to his friends by needling Adam, but he was unsuccessful so far at getting him riled up. Adam was used to dealing with rude patrons, and when he returned with their drinks he verbally bobbed and weaved between all of Francis’s efforts to provoke him.

But then it happened. Francis ventured into forbidden territory.

“So where’s your mother today?” asked Smythe.

“Out making a delivery,” Adam responded.

Smythe looked at his friends, raised his eyebrows, and then pressed his lips together, nodding knowingly. “Mm-hm. Is that what they call it nowadays?”

“She’s taking food to a widow.” Adam hated the fact that he even felt it necessary to qualify his earlier response.

“I see,” said Smythe. He smiled and then looked at his friends and chuckled. Adam began to walk away when Francis turned his attention back to Adam, calling out, “Tell me, Fletcher, does the lovely Miss Martin know what your mother does for a living?”

Adam turned back to face Smythe. He wrinkled his brow. “What is that supposed to mean?”

At this point, other patrons in the tavern were beginning to point and whisper as the boys had their increasingly public exchange.

“Ah, Fletcher. I’m only asking if the young lady knows that your mother is a practitioner of, well, shall we say the old profession. I saw you attempting to talk to her the other day, you know. She’s just a dream for you, Fletcher.”

Adam rushed over to Smythe’s table. “You listen to me, Smythe, and listen good. You can say whatever you want about me, about anybody, but you start running your mouth about my mother, and you’re gonna find out you’ve bitten off more than you can chew.”

“Oh really?” said Smythe. “Now you see, fellas”—he turned back towards his friends, who were now starting to look a little nervous—“this is what separates us from them. No class, no upbringing. Of course, what else would you expect from the little bastard son of a barmaid?”

One of Smythe’s friends nudged him and tried to whisper something to him, but Smythe dismissed whatever he was saying.

“Maybe we should take this outside,” said Adam.

“Am I embarrassing you?” said Smythe.

Adam shook his head. “Nope, but I’m about to embarrass

you.”

Moments later, Adam and Francis had moved their argument to the docks outside the tavern, followed by a slowly growing crowd of tavern patrons turned spectators.

The boys were in a standoff, just feet apart, when Adam pointed his finger at Francis and said, “I’m going to give you one chance to apologize for what you said.”

“Like hell I will,” said Smythe. He suddenly ran at Adam, who was stunned by the boy’s sudden aggression but was able to hold him off easily just the same.

The boys wrestled with each other. Adam hoped to tire the boy out when Francis attempted to swing at him. Adam’s reflexes were too quick, though. He swerved in time to miss the punch and then almost instinctively threw his own, knocking Francis to the ground with a single blow.

“Now get on up and start running your mouth again!” said Adam. “I dare you. You do it and so help me, I’ll knock your teeth right out on these docks!”

Francis Smythe tried to get up. Adam’s adrenaline surged as he looked down at his opponent, who appeared to be so stunned he couldn’t coordinate his limbs enough to pull himself upright. When he finally moved his hand away from his face, Adam could see Smythe’s nose was bloody, probably broken, and he was clearly in searing pain. Meanwhile, Adam felt as though he’d broken his knuckles, but he wasn’t about to let Francis know that.

Anyone who had just seen the boys, let alone knew them personally, would have placed their bets on Adam. He was a couple of inches shorter than Smythe, but he was muscular and sturdy, whereas Francis was a willowy young fellow, tall and thin, as if a good wind might blow him away.

As Adam saw blood drip down Smythe's face onto his clean, white shirt, he asked him, "What were you thinking? How did you think this would turn out? That I'd be on the ground with a bloody face and you'd be standing over me?"

Adam knew Francis had probably never been in a fist fight, and he couldn't imagine what made him want to start one today. He certainly never wanted to fight with Francis. There was no way it could have ended well, not with him being the son of Ellison Smythe, but now what was done was done, and there was no avoiding the repercussions that would certainly follow.

A mass of spectators had gathered on the docks around the brawling teenagers, including some of the friends who had accompanied Francis to the tavern. They were all pressing in, trying to get a closer view of the action, until the crowd parted to make way for Constable Squires, who was closely followed by one of Francis's friends, who had reported the altercation.

"Alright, boys," said the constable, "you've had your fun for the day."

He snapped his thick fingers and motioned for a couple of men in the crowd to help Francis Smythe get back on his feet.

"Now, what's this all about?" he asked them.

"That peon attacked me!" Francis grunted.

The constable turned to hear Adam's story. "And what do you say for yourself, young man?"

Adam was seething. "He started this! That arrogant ass wouldn't stop running that big mouth of his, and then he ran at me!"

The constable quickly glanced over at Francis, then responded to Adam. "Everybody knows Smythe has a big mouth, but what I want to know is, what caused the fight—and you better come up with something good, Fletcher, 'cause Smythe's here bleedin and you ain't got a scratch."

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"He's lost his mind! He came into the tavern and just started talking about my mother," said Adam.

"Everybody talks about your mother," Francis smirked, even as he held a handkerchief over his nose.

"I've already busted your face once. What difference will it make if I do it again?" Adam lunged forward to have another go at Francis, but Constable Squires stepped between them and held him back. "Now just you calm down, Fletcher. You ain't gettin anywhere by fightin with this one."

Adam fumed as Francis cracked a mocking smile.

"You boys need to come with me," said the constable.

"Us boys?" asked Smythe. He looked incredulous. "You mean *he* needs to go with you. And in irons, I'd say."

Squires spun around and leveled his gaze at Francis. "*Both* of you are coming with me. And I don't care *who* your daddy is, Mr. Smythe."

"My father won't like this! He'll be back in town soon, and I can assure you he'll hear all about it."

"I don't care, boy," said Constable Squires.

He grabbed the young men by the backs of their shirts and marched them straight to the magistrate's office.

THERE WAS NOTHING ABOUT Port Beaufort Magistrate's Office that looked judicial. Instead, it just looked like a simple one-story house. The little cedar shingle-covered building was situated catty-cornered across Front Street from the same docks where the Topsail Tavern was located.

The local magistrate, Peter Robins, was only thirty-two-years-old, but he displayed the maturity and wisdom of a man twice his age.

When Squires entered the magistrate's office, he tipped his head and removed his hat before he spoke. "Excuse me, sir."

It was strange for Adam to see a middle-aged man as big and brawny as Constable Lawson Squires show such respect and deference to a man who was young enough to be his son.

"Good day, Constable," said Mr. Robins. "Come right in and state your business."

"Mr. Robins," said the constable, "these two boys were fighting on the docks down by the Topsail."

"I see." The magistrate observed both boys for a moment before asking, "Who started it?"

"Sir, must you really ask such a question?" said Francis.

Adam scoffed and looked at Francis. "You must be joking, Smythe!" He turned his attention back to Mr. Robins. "He started it with that mouth of his!"

Mr. Robins looked directly at Adam and asked, "But did you start the physical altercation, Mr. Fletcher?"

Adam sneered at Francis. "No, but I finished it."

"I want to know what happened. Why were you trying to kill each other?" asked Mr. Robins.

"Come on, sir! I'd never bother fighting with someone like him," said Adam. "I mean, look at him! But I had to. He got out of line. He insulted my mother's honor."

Francis looked at Adam with contempt. "What honor? Your mother's nothing but a harlot barmaid."

It took every bit of self-control that Adam had within him to keep from pouncing on Francis once more.

The magistrate looked as if he could sense Adam's percolating rage, so he motioned for him to settle down before he asked Francis, "Mr. Smythe, tell me, sir: Do you have personal knowledge as it relates to Ms. Fletcher's occupation?"

THE SMUGGLER'S GAMBIT

Francis gasped. "Sir, I am a gentleman! I have no personal knowledge of the local strumpets." He paused mischievously. "But one does hear things. And I heard that Fletcher's mother practices the old profession. And that's how she got him."

He looked over at Adam and sneered.

Mr. Robins walked around to the front of his desk and leaned against its edge. "So, Mr. Smythe, let me understand this correctly. You admit you have no *personal* knowledge about Adam's mother. You also admit your accusation against her character is based on hearsay. Is that a fair assessment?"

Francis wouldn't respond.

The magistrate continued: "So indulge me if you would, Mr. Smythe. If you did not have personal knowledge as to the character or profession of Mr. Fletcher's mother, nor proof, why would you make such an accusation?"

Francis's eyes grew wide. "Because everybody knows it! Adam Fletcher is the bastard son of a loose barmaid, and he's a hot-tempered brawler to boot. I want to know when you intend to lock him up!"

Constable Squires looked at Mr. Robins. Mr. Robins returned the constable's gaze and nodded. Adam said nothing. He knew he'd blown it this time. This wasn't just an ordinary street fight with another working-class boy like himself. This time he'd thrown a hard punch at someone who could effectively ruin his life.

The magistrate looked at Adam, then Francis. "Mr. Fletcher, Mr. Smythe."

The two boys both stood a little more upright and looked at the magistrate. Francis looked like he was fighting a smile that was trying to spread across his face. *He'd love to see me put away*, thought Adam.

The two had never liked each other. Adam always hated how pompous Francis acted, and Francis had needled Adam since the first time they met. Adam was pretty sure it all came down to jealousy for Francis. Adam—in spite of his lower social status—felt sure he had at least a few qualities Francis wished he could possess. He was handsome, strong, and confident. Adam probably also seemed to have a more adventurous life, living and working at the Topsail Tavern, than eighteen-year-old Smythe, who mostly found himself being kept at home under the watchful eye of his father's many servants.

"I'm either locking both of you up or neither of you up," said the magistrate.

Francis was dumbfounded. "You are *not* locking me up. How dare you even suggest such a thing—I'll have your job!"

Mr. Robins nodded. "You may certainly try, Mr. Smythe, but for now I am quite literally sitting in the judge's seat. And I say that regardless of who started the fight, if you had insulted my mother that way when I was Mr. Fletcher's age, I'd have probably done the same thing. What kind of a son wouldn't step up to defend his own mother, for goodness' sake?"

Adam couldn't believe it. He wasn't going to be locked up after all.

"And as for you, Mr. Fletcher, with age I pray you will grow in temperance. Fighting in the streets is hardly the way to build a successful life."

"He'll never be successful," taunted Francis. "He's a worthless urchin now, and fifty years from now he'll still be a worthless urchin. You can't turn lead into gold."

Robins said, "That'll be enough, Mr. Smythe. Keep up with your attacks and I may yet reconsider putting you behind bars."

Adam looked at his adversary and just grinned.

THE SMUGGLER'S GAMBIT

Francis was outraged. "I can assure you my father will hear about this episode today. May I leave now?"

Robins nodded his head and motioned for Constable Squires to show him out. Just as they were about to leave the office, the magistrate had one more thing to say to him.

"Mr. Smythe," he said. "You were born a little gentleman. Your father is a gentleman."

"Of course," agreed Francis.

"I would like to suggest that you not dishonor your father, nor that you bring embarrassment to your family, by creating for yourself the reputation of being a spoiled brat. Just as you say you hear people talk about Mr. Fletcher's mother, so too have I heard murmuring about you, sir. Your father is a good man. Do not make the mistake of bringing his good name down with your actions."

Francis glared at the magistrate, then stormed out of the office.

Once he was out of the building, Mr. Robins walked over to look out the window. When he saw Francis crossing the road, he returned to his desk and sat down.

"Mr. Fletcher," he said, "what do you think your greatest problem is?"

"Sir?"

"If one were to ask me, I'd say you have too much free time on your hands."

Adam remained silent.

"I think it's high time you find an apprenticeship so that you can develop your talents—make something of yourself."

"An apprenticeship, sir? You mean learn some trade?" The suggestion took Adam by surprise. "I'm working down at the tavern. I've grown up there—I like it there."

“Apparently it isn’t keeping you busy enough if you have time to get into fisticuffs so frequently down at the docks, and with Francis Smythe no less.”

“He came in and started that fight, sir. I asked him to step outside, and figured that would’ve been warning enough to get him to back up and apologize, but he didn’t, and he kept at it, so I had to teach him a lesson.”

“Mr. Fletcher, while I can appreciate your desire to defend your mother—and I really do believe that is an honorable thing to do on your part—I will say it’s quite foolish of you to think you can go through life getting into fights whenever a man insults you.”

“He didn’t just insult me, though, Mr. Robins. If it had just been about me, I’d have ignored him. But he threw my mama’s name in the mud, and I just won’t have it.”

Just as Mr. Robins was about to respond, Adam continued: “I know folks say those kinds of things about her, but they know better than to say ’em to my face. Francis Smythe wanted that fight.”

“Perhaps he did,” said the magistrate, “but are you normally in the business of giving Francis Smythe whatever he wants?”

Adam rolled his eyes.

“You’re a clever boy, Mr. Fletcher. I wouldn’t think you’d fall for his bait so easily.”

“You mean when someone says something like that, I should just let it go?”

“That’s precisely what I mean, Mr. Fletcher.”

Adam shifted his weight from one foot to the other and said, “May I go now?”

Mr. Robins quickly shook his head. “No. You may go after we discuss the matter of your apprenticeship. Is there a

particular trade that interests you, or should I choose something on your behalf?"

Adam thought for a moment before answering. "Do I have to decide right now?"

"I'm being quite generous by giving you this opportunity. You could face criminal charges for that attack on Mr. Smythe." Adam was about to interrupt, but Mr. Robins raised his hand to silence him. "I'm not going to charge you with the assault. However, I do need to tell the boy's father something if he asks about it when he returns—and mark my words, he will ask about it. I want to let him know that I've dealt with the matter, but more importantly, I want you to make something of yourself, Mr. Fletcher. I don't want you to waste your life cleaning tables in that tavern and brawling in the streets in your free time. Wouldn't you like to be a productive member of society?"

Adam leaned his back against the wall, but he was too frustrated to answer.

"Tell me, if you could learn any trade, what would it be?"

Adam shuffled his feet in place as he thought about the question. "I'd just as soon run a tavern, sir. Why can't I do that?"

"That's not an option," said the magistrate sternly.

Adam hesitated, then said, "Will you give me the weekend to think about it?"

Mr. Robins gave him a strict look. "Monday morning first thing I want you back in this office with your decision. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. May I go now?"

"You may. And do not forget. I expect you back here first thing Monday. If you're not, I'll be within my rights to impose a stricter punishment for your assault on Mr. Smythe."

Adam nodded. He hung his head and left the office.

Chapter Three

THE TOPSAIL TAVERN was packed, as it typically was on a Friday night. In colder months, diners were left to compete for tables closest to one of the hearths at each end of the establishment, but in the month of May the warmer weather outdoors began causing the air inside the place to feel thicker. Tables near windows were preferable because of the fresh breeze that would blow through.

Year round the air was layered with a bouquet of scents that included the more pungent briny odor of the old salts who came in to drink, the cloying perfumes of the women who occasionally came to sit with their sailors, the intoxicating fragrance of spilled rum and sweet tobacco smoke, and the yeasty aromas of strong ale and hot bread. Added to all of that was the melody of smells that emanated from whatever dishes were being brought out from the kitchen.

In spite of the high energy in the tavern, Adam struggled to put one foot in front of the other on this night. He confused several orders and had forgotten to wait on one group of men entirely. When one of them finally lost his patience, Valentine had to intervene and wait on their table himself—something the tavern keeper rarely did.

Valentine returned to his place behind the bar and began to pour ale for the men. Adam was there leaning against the bar, absentmindedly staring out into the dining area.

“Listen, I know you’re upset, boy, but there’s work to be done, and it ain’t going to do itself.” The sixty-something-year-old barkeeper grabbed the four mugs by their handles and quickly delivered them to the thirsty men before returning to the bar.

“Can’t this day just hurry up and be done with?” said Adam.

“Ah, don’t wish your time away, boy. You know what the Good Book says—that life is but a vapor; it appears for a little time and then vanishes away.” Valentine waved his fingers in the air as he said that last part.

“I know. But if any day could vanish, I wish it would be this one.”

“What are you whinin about? Don’t seem too bad to me. Seems like things could’ve been a lot worse for you after what happened this afternoon.”

Adam scoffed. “I don’t see how.”

“They coulda thrown you right into the gaol, boy—or the stocks. How would you feel about spending the night in there? Then you’d *really* be wishing the time would go faster. And can you imagine what Francis Smythe would do then? Huh!”

Just then Mary Fletcher joined her son and Valentine at the bar. “Hello, boys.”

Adam gave his mother a weak wave but wouldn’t speak.

Valentine said, “Finally back, eh? How’s she doing? Must’ve talked your ear off.”

“Oh, you know how the Widow Simpson is,” said Mary. “Bless her sweet heart, she’s just lonely.”

“Course she is,” declared Valentine. “You know that’s the only reason for her standing order here. Yes indeed. The Widow Simpson has her servants. She don’t need to order food from this tavern, but she sure does love having you sit and talk with her on Friday evenings. I reckon it’s the best part of her week.”

Mary smiled. Her youthful brown eyes sparkled. As young as she looked, one would never guess she had a seventeen-year-old son. The dark-haired beauty had given birth to Adam when she was only eighteen herself. Her son’s coloring and features were so similar to her own, passing sailors who dined in the tavern frequently mistook them for brother and sister rather than mother and child.

She noticed Adam’s downcast expression and put her hand on his back before asking, “What’s wrong with you?”

Adam looked at her and said, “I’ve been waiting for you to get back all day.”

“You know I go to the Widow Simpson’s every Friday,” she said.

“I know, but there’s something I have to tell you.”

“He got in a fight this afternoon,” Valentine interjected. “With Francis Smythe of all people.”

Adam rolled his eyes.

“Please tell me you’re joking,” she said.

Adam shook his head. “He’s not joking. But that’s not the worst of it.”

Mary gave a nervous chuckle. “Well, it can’t be that bad, can it? I mean, you’re here. You’re not in the gaol.”

"It must be bad," said Valentine. "He's been useless all night. Wouldn't tell me what happened, though. Said he was waiting for you to get here."

Mary put her hands on her hips. "Well, I'm here now. So what is it?"

Adam took a deep breath. "Mr. Robins says he wants to put me in an apprenticeship. He told me to pick a trade and let him know what I've decided by Monday."

The color left Mary's face. "He can't make you do that. Can he?"

She looked at Valentine with desperation. The old man had been the closest thing Mary had to a father since she was a young girl. Valentine Hodges and his wife, Margaret, now deceased, had taken Mary in at the request of her father when he was on his deathbed with yellow fever. Mary's mother died in childbirth, so she and her father had lived in a rented house owned by the Hodges. Since Margaret and Valentine had never been able to have children, Margaret joyfully looked after Mary as though she were her own, and Adam was like their grandson.

Valentine stroked his stubbly chin. "I don't know, girl. Mr. Robins could've locked the boy up today. You should've seen Francis Smythe's face. Adam busted his nose up good-fashioned."

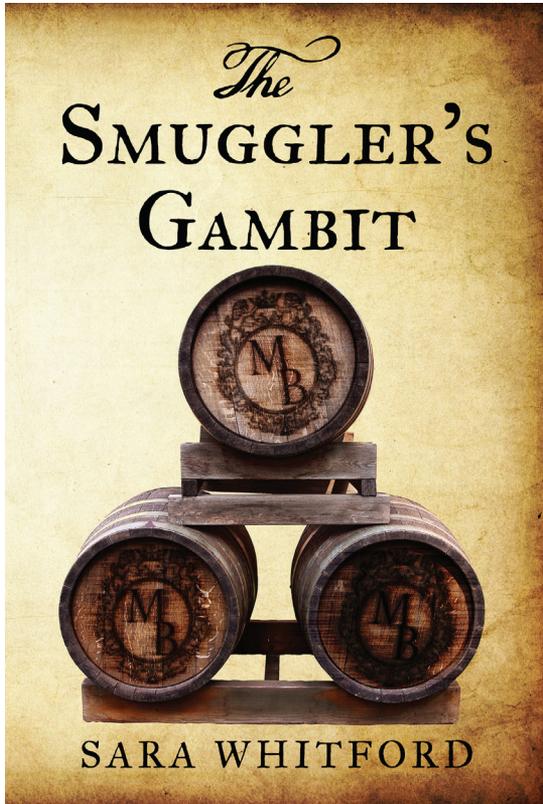
Mary shot a disappointed look at her son and struggled to speak past the lump that had formed in her throat. "What have I told you about fighting, Adam? Huh? What have I said? You just had to do it, didn't you? Why couldn't you just ignore the arrogant little toad?"

Adam inhaled sharply, then shrugged.

"Well, I guess they're finally getting what they wanted," she said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" said Adam.

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