

The Devil Take Tomorrow

Gretchen Jeannette

4th July, 1777

*To His Excellency George Washington, Esquire,
Commander in Chief of the Armies of the United States of America*

Sir,

The enclosed news of a great threat against you requires your immediate action. On the second instant, I stumbled upon a heinous plot devised by Major-General Sir William Howe and General Charles Mitchell of the British high command. While I listened from hiding, the generals discussed the mission of their agent, a British captain named Parker, who has enlisted in the American army under a false name. An unknown number of accomplices support Parker, for the sworn purpose of capturing you and delivering you into General Howe's hands. Failing that, Captain Parker's orders are to assassinate you by any available means.

I assure you of the truth and veracity of this warning, and I beg you to take heed. My esteem for Your Excellency and my gratitude for the hope you bring forth in this glorious struggle have made me forever,

Your Obedient Patriot Servant

Chapter One

Swirling mist cloaked the trio of rebel soldiers galloping furiously toward a rendezvous. Raking spurs across lathered hides while shouting urgent commands, the riders thundered over muddy roads that snaked up hillocks and plunged through wooded defiles blazing with the colors of autumn. Deep in shadowy pinewoods, where a farmer's cart track formed a crossroads in the gloom, the ragtag band of soldiers reined their winded mounts to a halt, withdrew pistols from saddle holsters and ranged across the roadway to await their prey.

Hearing the rattle of an approaching coach, its sluggish horses urged on by the sharp crack of a whip, they rose in their stirrups, poised to strike.

"Stay sharp, boys," warned their energetic leader, a muscular fellow of middling height. "They'll be armed. Shoot to kill if you must."

Drawn by four beautifully matched sorrels, a large black coach, trimmed with scarlet and gilt, appeared over a rise and rumbled toward them.

"Now!"

Brandishing pistols, yelling like demons, the rebels swept forward, their fearsome charge causing the stunned coachman to haul back on the reins, abruptly halting the team, sending his passengers tumbling from bench seats inside the vehicle. Not about to tempt fate, the coachman quickly raised his hands. The footman, lacking his companion's good judgment, sprang from his perch wielding a compact blunderbuss, his focus the rebel leader. Taking aim with the bell-mouthed weapon, he failed to detect the rider who circled behind the conveyance and clubbed him behind the ear with a pistol butt, pitching him onto his face. Leaping down from his horse, the man bludgeoned him again with a vicious blow, then removed the blunderbuss from his limp fingers.

The rebel leader threw open the coach door. "Get out!" he commanded the occupants, motioning sharply with his flintlock.

Robert Sinclair, prominent merchant and descendant of British aristocracy, alighted first. An imposing figure in black wool broadcloth, ruffled stock and beaver cocked hat, he surveyed the marauders with an imperious glare, as though considering unruly servants. His crisp, incisive voice revealed a man who expected obedience. "What's the meaning of this?"

"Shut your mouth. Ladies, would you have me drag you out?"

Two women stepped from the coach, one middle-aged and graying but glamorously handsome, the other young, a dark haired beauty of such arresting face and figure that the rebel leader paused to appreciate the sight of her. A roguish grin spread over his face. "Who have we here?"

Maddie Graves kept silent but raised her chin a notch. Only a week ago, she and her stepmother had been living in Robert Sinclair's town house in British-occupied Manhattan. Now, after a journey fraught with perilous ferry crossings and unscrupulous innkeepers, she found herself in this wooded glen near Philadelphia, facing an entirely different threat. As she locked stares with the rebel leader, her racing mind registered details of his commanding yet threadbare presence—auburn hair graying at the temples, fraying uniform spattered with mud, black fantail hat bearing a faded cockade. Something about him struck a chord in her memory, a vague familiarity she could not quite place, though she knew she had seen him before. Despite his worn appearance, he exuded natural authority and the awful aggression of someone about to launch an attack. His glittering stare seemed to pierce through her.

Robert Sinclair broke the charged quiet. “She’s no concern of yours,” he snapped. “Now what the devil do you want?”

The rebel leader’s eyes flashed with annoyance. “Search him,” he ordered his men.

Over Sinclair’s protests, they stripped off his coat, dug into his pockets, rifled his waistcoat and forced him to remove his boots. They ripped away his powdered bob wig, revealing a head of close-cropped, steel gray hair, but the headpiece held nothing of interest.

“Search the coach.”

“Now you listen to me,” Sinclair angrily asserted, recovering his wig from the muddy ground. “We’re innocent civilians, and you’ve no right—”

The rebel jammed a gun muzzle under his chin. “I said shut your mouth.”

Sinclair sucked in his breath, quelling a retort, for the chilling expression behind the weapon bespoke death if he said anything else.

After searching the coach, the rebel’s men disappointedly shook their heads.

He stalked through mud to confront the two women, crowding them against the coach. “Who’s first?”

Whimpering in fright, the older woman sagged against the vehicle, a hand pressed to her heart as his malevolent gaze bored into her eyes. “Maddie,” she whispered, her scrabbling fingers clutching the young woman’s arm.

Maddie Graves stepped between her terrified stepmother and their antagonist. “Take heart, Agnes. I won’t let him harm you.”

“Well now,” he leered, “a brave little volunteer.” Again he looked her over, as one might inspect an exceptional filly for sale, her form fine and lithe, with a wonderfully slender waist and a full bust shown to advantage by a tightly laced riding habit. “Come here, girl. Let’s see what you’re hiding under your petticoat.”

To her alarm, he seized her bodice, yanking her to him, then reached a grimy hand down to hike up her skirts. She struck his face with all her strength, the impact stinging her palm. The fist that bashed her cheek knocked her against Agnes, who moaned and crumpled in a heap.

Quivering with outrage, Maddie held her throbbing cheek. She now had the measure of this man, and with her eyes ablaze she warned him, “Don’t you touch me again, you by-blow of a whore.”

His nostrils flared. Gripping her shoulders, he flung her to the ground, followed her down and drove a knee into her stomach, pinning her in the mud. As she pummeled him with her fists, he yanked up her skirts, exposing a pair of exquisitely molded legs encased in pink silk stockings held up by ribbon garters above her knees. He gripped her sleek thigh, his questing fingers probing higher, only to stop shy of his goal when she screamed as though wounded. After a moment’s hesitation, he renewed his assault, though now his resolve seemed diminished, even forced.

Maddie Graves, sensing his reluctance, fought back with increasing fire. Heaving upward with maddened strength, no longer feeling or fearing any contact, she clawed for his face. She managed to rake his cheek, carving bloody furrows in his flesh.

“*Bitch!*”

His balled fist rose like a mallet, making her cringe behind warding hands. Abruptly he paused, head canting as he listened intently. “Boys, did you hear that?”

In the next instant, the pounding of hooves and the crash of splintering pine boughs shuddered through the air. As the startled rebels turned in confusion, a horseman exploded from the woods astride a snorting, wild-eyed stallion. Wielding a brace of pistols, with a savage yell he bore down on the rebels, took aim at their dumbfounded leader and fired, sending sheeting flames and

whistling lead at his target. The ball pierced the rebel's arm, the impact knocking him to the ground. Staggering to his feet, he bellowed in pain, "Goddamn you!" and dove for cover.

Wheeling his big bay charger around in billowing smoke, the rider drew a bead on a second rebel, who knelt behind a frozen Robert Sinclair, attempting to use him as a shield while leveling his own flintlock. Lead whipcracked from the horseman's pistol. The rebel yelped in agony, clutching his right shoulder as blood seeped between his fingers. Steel hissed as the horseman drew his saber. Sawing on the reins, he dug in his heels and charged the remaining threat. Confronted by flashing, deadly hooves, the third rebel wisely dove aside, but as he rose again to fire, the horseman swung his blade. Sparks flew as steel struck steel with a ringing blow. The rebel's pistol went flying, his hasty shot winging harmlessly into the trees.

The rider then circled for another assault, maneuvering between the marauders and their would-be victims.

"Retreat!" cried the rebel leader, but his companions were already scrambling onto their mounts.

Whipping the saber above his head, the horseman galloped after the fleeing men, chased them over a low rise, around a bend, out of sight of the coach, leaving Sinclair and his party staring after them in breathless wonder.

A distant gunshot rang out, followed by a muted, piteous wailing that roused Sinclair from his trance. Urging the women back into the coach, he helped his coachman lift his unconscious manservant inside and laid him on the bench seat facing the women.

As the group prepared to flee, the horseman reappeared and cantered toward them. His saber blade was coated with blood, his face flushed with excitement beneath his three-cornered hat. Reining in, he wiped the blade on his pant leg, slotted it back into its scabbard, and immediately began to reload his silver-mounted pistols with practiced, absent motions. As he worked, his steady gaze assessed the shaken travelers. "Is everyone all right?"

"Mr. Moody took a nasty knock on his head," said Sinclair, "but I think he'll recover. What's your name, young man?"

"Ethan Matlock, sir."

"Mr. Matlock, you have our eternal gratitude for routing those villains."

"Don't mention it, sir. They had it coming." Biting off the end of a paper-wrapped cartridge, Matlock poured the charge into the muzzle, removed the wooden rammer and pushed the ball down the brass barrel to seat it atop the powder. The wadded brown paper followed. "I've been trailing those three for the past hour," he declared, priming the flash pan with fine powder from his flask. "Their troop ambushed a British patrol. Once the spoils were divided, they split off from their friends and rode straight here." Eyeing Sinclair, he tilted and then lightly tapped his pistol to knock a few grains into the touchhole. "Almost as if they were expecting you."

"I hadn't realized what a lawless place this would be."

Matlock smiled without humor. "Where the armies go the law soon departs." A far-off pattering of gunfire punctuated his remark.

"We were told General Howe was victorious at Germantown, and Philadelphia was now in his possession. We were also informed, by a reliable source, that the approaches to the city would be well-guarded by British patrols."

"You heard wrong, sir. These roads are so thick with rebels you can hardly go amiss of them."

"Mr. Matlock," Maddie Graves spoke up, "may we prevail upon you to escort us to safety?"

Matlock nodded his assent, tipping his hat while appraising her. "By all means, Miss."

"Are you from these parts?" asked Sinclair.

“No sir.”

“Not far ahead is an inn where we can take our bearings and perhaps summon soldiers to assist us.”

His pistols reloaded, Matlock secured them in his saddle holsters. “I’ll ride ahead, sir. Watch behind us for trouble.” Touching his heels to the stallion’s flanks, he cantered away.

With a sharp whip crack and a protesting whinny, the coach-and-four set out after him at a fast clip, rumbling up the rise, around the bend, to where three bloody bodies lay sprawled in a ditch.

Matlock retrieved two of the rebels’ mounts and those weapons not fouled with mud. Tossing the coachman a pistol, he then led the captured horses behind the conveyance and tethered them to the footman’s step. Quickly mounting up, he scanned the woods all around, alert for any sign of danger. His concentration intensified when he noticed Maddie Graves at the coach window, her expression melancholy as she surveyed the corpses in the ditch. Weak afternoon light revealed the bruise beginning to darken her cheek. When she looked at him directly, Matlock could not resist exchanging a lingering glance. He needed no one to tell him that this was no ordinary wench. She had a wondrous presence, compelling his attention with the power of her gaze. Only after she withdrew from view did his thoughts return to the business at hand.

Chapter Two

Bradford's Inn, at the sign of the Smiling Half Moon, stood at a fork in the Trenton Road, eight miles northeast of Philadelphia. Nestled in a grove of ancient oak trees, the rambling, two-story brick house, a popular stopping place of the New York and New Jersey stagecoaches, was flanked by a large stable and a springhouse.

The inn's harried proprietor ushered Sinclair's party into the deserted common room. Woefully he explained, "At one time I was famous for my board, but with these cursed armies tramping all over the countryside, commandeering whatever they please, I haven't enough food or drink to offer you a decent fare. What the rebels didn't steal, the British confiscated in the king's name. All I can set before you today is mutton, bread and peas, and some ale."

"That will do," Matlock assured him. While the others seated themselves at a polished plank table, he moved to a nearby window to survey the road in waning daylight.

Before long his attention strayed to the table, drawn to admire Maddie Graves. He put her age at about twenty, perhaps younger. From her present composure, one would never guess that an hour ago she had suffered a vicious assault, the thought of which alone would have caused many women to swoon. Recalling the sight of those long, shapely legs bared to the world, the fury on her face as she fought like a tigress, he imagined such beauty and fire would make for stimulating company on a cold night.

He turned back to the window, her image branded in his mind.

"We need to secure rooms," Sinclair informed the innkeeper, who was busily lighting tallow candles. "My sister and Mr. Moody are exhausted," indicating a pale Agnes Graves and an unnaturally quiet Thomas Moody. Taking stock of his injured manservant, whose glazed eyes and sagging shoulders revealed the seriousness of his condition, he added, "Kindly summon a physician for Mr. Moody. Tell him I'll pay in coin."

The innkeeper immediately perked up. "Right away, Mr. Sinclair."

Sinclair patted Moody's arm. "Thomas, you needn't worry about attending me. Go upstairs and rest. I'll have supper sent to your room."

"Yes, sir." Moody's sluggish voice barely rose above a whisper. "Thank you, sir."

"Mr. Bradford, make sure my coachman is fed. He's outside tending our horses."

"Of course, sir."

"Oh, and one more thing," Sinclair said. "Have you a means of sending a missive to the British lines?" When the innkeeper hesitated, dragging a hand through his thinning red hair, Sinclair added, "I'll make it worth your while."

Bradford's hesitancy evaporated. "I'll see what I can arrange, sir. Come along, Mr. Moody."

Rising on unsteady legs, Moody followed him upstairs, leaning on the banister for support.

"I'll carry your message," Matlock said over his shoulder.

"Frankly, I'd rather you stay with us. I find your presence reassuring. Come," Sinclair invited him, "take supper with us."

"Thank you, but I'd better go outside and keep watch. Just send me a pint of ale, if you would."

Agnes Graves fixed her haunted gaze on Matlock. "Do you really think we'll be disturbed here?"

"I think we can't be too careful," he said as he left.

Matlock found his stallion in the stable, in the care of Sinclair's coachman, Abner Portman, a round-bellied, jovial man who welcomed him with a grin. "Hello, sir! I've been rubbing him down for you. He's a damn fine looking animal."

"He's called King Arthur."

"A perfect name for him, sir. He's certainly kingly."

"He never lets me forget it."

At Matlock's request, Portman had removed the stallion's bridle but had left him saddled for ready use. Secured with cross ties in the hard-packed center aisle, Arthur filled the barn with his presence. An extraordinary gift from a wine merchant, whose stable Matlock saved from a fire, he had matured from a gangly colt into a magnificent creature. From his broad chest to his muscled haunches to his intelligent eyes, he embodied the best qualities desired in a warhorse. He was not only quick enough at the gallop to defeat any challenger, he had the stamina to cover many miles with his ground-eating trot, both of these tasks appearing effortless with his majestic grace and style. Although he stood over sixteen hands and weighed more than 1,200 pounds, Matlock could control his power with a flick of his fingers on the reins or a touch of his heel on the flank.

Matlock scratched beneath the horse's flowing mane. "He could use some hay."

"I'm afraid there ain't much to be had, sir. Mr. Bradford told me some rebel cavalymen carted off most of his feed. Oh well, things are bound to improve once we reach Philadelphia."

"You picked a fine time to travel there."

Portman throttled a laugh. "That's the truth, sir. Took us most of a week to get here from Manhattan."

Withdrawing a short-stemmed clay pipe from his saddlebag, Matlock loosely packed it with tobacco, lit a wood sliver with a lantern's flame, and drew on the bowl until it glowed red. "Mr. Sinclair must have important business in Philadelphia."

Glancing sidelong at him, Portman said, "Mr. Sinclair has important business with the British, sir. He's a favorite of the high officers, you see. He and his partners own a fleet of merchantmen that help supply the British army. What with the rebel forts controlling the river below Philadelphia, two of his ships are stuck in Delaware Bay. I suppose that's why he flew here when he heard the city had fallen, to see if the British could rescue his cargoes. That," he added, "and the mood in New York was getting a little too warm for him. Someone sent him an anonymous hangman's noose, you see."

Portman liked to talk. Realizing this, Matlock leaned his shoulder against the stable wall, drew on his pipe and listened, his eyes half-closed against curling smoke.

"He hosted some grand entertainments for the British in Manhattan," Portman said. "One time he staged an extravaganza on his lawn, with tumblers dressed like Indians, and magicians performing the most amazing sleight of hand, even making General Howe's hat disappear into thin air. At midnight Mr. Sinclair uncovered a wooden statue of Mister Washington holding up a sword like he's begging a fight. At his signal some soldiers wheeled a cannon to the edge of the lawn. He aimed it himself and blew the bugger apart with his very first shot. Funniest thing I ever saw. I thought General Howe would split his sides laughing."

Portman sighed and grew misty-eyed. "I hated to leave Manhattan, but Mr. Sinclair insisted on coming home."

"He's from here?"

"Yes sir. He left Philadelphia last winter to escape the mobs. Within a week someone torched his town house on Fourth Street—mob rabble, no doubt—but he owns a grand estate on the Schuylkill River south of town. Hopefully the place ain't the worse for wear. Mrs. Graves and

Miss Madeleine wanted to stay in New York, but..." Portman gave a little shrug, "Mr. Sinclair holds all their cards."

"They depend on his patronage?"

"Yes sir. He took them in a few months ago."

"Where is Mr. Graves?"

Compressing his lips, Portman shook his head, his mood turning somber. "He's a prisoner on the *Jersey*. Dunno if he's dead or alive, sir."

More than likely dead, Matlock imagined, or soon would be. He had heard accounts of conditions aboard the infamous British prison ship, an old converted man-of-war, which lay embedded in the mud in Wallabout Bay across the East River from Manhattan. Thousands of Americans had died in her filthy, stinking hold, systematically exterminated through starvation, harsh elements, overcrowding and unchecked diseases. The British buried their corpses en masse in the mudflats along the bay's shoreline or simply threw them overboard. Matlock wondered what Graves had done to end up in that gruesome hell.

Hearing a door close, he looked toward the inn and saw a slender figure approaching in the twilight. He and Portman removed their hats as Maddie Graves entered the stable. When she stood in the lantern's glow, he beheld the full view of her beauty—the dark hair cascading down her back, the deep green of her eyes, that aura of artful innocence. She had changed from her soiled riding habit into a simple gown gathered at the waist, a heavy shawl thrown about her shoulders.

"I brought your ale," she said, offering him a brimming tankard. "We saved supper for you."

"Thank you, Miss Graves." Matlock knocked the ashes from his pipe. "Have you had supper, Mr. Portman?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Go inside and eat and get some rest. You've had a day. I'll keep an eye on things here."

"Thank you, sir. That's very kind of you." Portman bowed slightly. "Good evening, Miss Madeleine."

"Abner," she gently admonished, "how many times must I tell you to call me Maddie?"

He smiled. "Yes, Miss Maddie."

"Good evening, Abner."

Watching him stroll away, Matlock remarked, "He's certainly a good-natured fellow."

"Abner's a dear. He wouldn't know a mean thought if it jumped up and bit him. I once told him he needed to toughen up, and he said, 'La, Miss, you know I ain't spunky. Deep down I'm just a soft-hearted cuss with no stomach for fisticuffs and such.'"

An amused Matlock watched the play of lantern light on her hair. "Do you do any other impressions?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. Here's my impression of a woman who can scarcely imagine what would have happened today had you not appeared when you did. She believes a mere 'thank you' for your bravery is wholly inadequate."

"It's plenty good enough for me."

"I do thank you, Mr. Matlock," she said softly, "more than I can say."

Held in thrall by her gaze, Matlock indulged in a moment of fantasy. A man could easily lose his head over this nymph, he decided, breathing in the delicate fragrance of her lilac perfume. He knew not what trials the night would bring, only that he would make it his business to protect her, and he pitied anyone who would stand in his way. "I was glad to be of service," he said. Gently he cupped her chin, tilting her head to examine the swollen bruise marring her flawless skin.

Although his boldness seemed to startle her, she did not withdraw from his touch. “That must hurt like the devil.”

“It does,” she admitted, “but I’m afraid my pride hurts worse. I wish I hadn’t cowered for that brute.”

“I’d say you gave as well as you got.”

“If I’d only had a weapon, I would have saved you some trouble,” she said and seemed, to his enjoyment, to mean it. “What do you suppose they were looking for?”

He tucked his pipe into his waistcoat pocket. “That’s a question for your uncle.”

“My step uncle,” she corrected him, the distinction clearly important to her. “Whatever their motive, you cannot know the relief I felt when you ran them off.”

“They were careless. They paid for it.”

She shivered slightly. “I expected better from soldiers supposedly fighting for a glorious cause.”

“I’d hardly call them soldiers, Miss Graves. I’ve crossed paths with their kind before. They use this war as an excuse for cowardly violence.”

She contemplated him. “Where are you from, Mr. Matlock?”

“Originally from Albany, but I’ve spent the past year recruiting and training Loyalist militia in the Hudson Highlands.”

“There’s been no shortage of action up that way. But now the action is here,” she said, “and so are you. You don’t wear a uniform. Are you an adventurer?”

“I’m a man who’s tired of being lightly regarded. I understand the British have finally decided to make proper use of Loyalist support, since they can’t seem to manage this war alone. I’m here to offer my services to General Howe.”

“Well,” she said drily, “you’ll certainly have his ear when we reach the city. Robert Sinclair will see to that.”

Arthur suddenly snorted and stamped his great front hoof. Ears pricked forward, he startled the quiet barn with a strident whicker. As the sound died away, the muffled pounding of hooves on the roadway penetrated the hush.

Maddie Graves, her brave front wavering, sidled closer to Matlock while eyeing the gloom out the doorway. Although he was a stranger, a mysterious one at that, she did not doubt for an instant his willingness to defend her. She felt him lightly touch her shoulder.

“Stay here,” he said, with what seemed to her a remarkable calm. She watched him withdraw his brace of elegant pistols, which bore right- and left-hand firelocks enabling both guns to be fired at once. She heard the sharp clicks of their hammers as Matlock slipped outside.

She waited for what seemed an eternity, until he reappeared as quietly as he had left, materializing as if from nowhere, the scent of pipe smoke and well-oiled leather he brought with him somehow comforting.

“It was only a passerby,” he assured her.

She watched him return his pistols to his belt, securing them with the long, flat hooks mounted on the sides opposite the firelocks. When Arthur tossed his head in agitation, whickering for attention, Matlock obliged him.

As he soothed the horse, scratching his thick glossy neck, Maddie heard affection in his low-pitched voice. She saw that his hand was large and broad, with long, almost delicate fingers, and that it was gentle with its caress. Responding in kind, the stallion playfully thrust his muzzle against Matlock’s chest, provoking a laugh.

“I know you’re hungry. I’ll see what I can scare up.”

She marveled at Matlock's transformation, for here was the man who, a short while ago, had mercilessly cut down three armed soldiers and left their bodies sprawled like so much rubbish in a muddy ditch. She wondered how many others had fallen to his formidable skills.

She said, "He's a beautiful horse."

"Don't say that too loudly." Matlock glanced at her. "He's already full of himself."

A dimple appeared at the corner of her mouth. Matlock noticed it, and his hands stilled. Arthur forgotten, he approached her again, fixing on the humorous curves of full red lips. He stopped short as Robert Sinclair called out to them from the inn's porch, signaling his approach. Instantly Matlock saw a change come over Maddie Graves. Her smile faded as she drew her shawl tightly closed.

Sinclair strode into the stable. "Ah, here you are. I thought it best to announce myself," he quipped at Matlock, "considering what I saw this afternoon." When his gaze settled on Maddie, his demeanor abruptly changed. He sounded irritated. "Go inside and tend to Agnes. She's feeling unwell."

Thus dismissed, Maddie lingered for a moment before leaving, ignoring her step uncle's impatient look. "Goodnight, Mr. Matlock. Thank you again for all your help."

He bowed courteously. "Consider me yours to count on, Miss Graves." Even after she left the barn he continued watching, until she disappeared into the inn.

Sinclair chuckled. "I see you have eyes for that exquisite piece of flesh. She's quite a feast for the senses, is she not, Mr. Matlock?"

"She's charming," he replied, then pushed Maddie Graves from his thoughts. "Have you sent your message?"

"Yes. I expect to have an escort by morning. I'd like you to accompany us to the city."

"I'm happy to oblige, sir."

"What are your plans, if you don't mind my asking?"

"To secure a position with the army."

Sinclair brightened with enthusiasm. "When the time is right, I'll put you before General Howe himself." Removing a lantern from its hook, he beckoned Matlock, "Come with me." He led him outside to where Portman had parked his coach. Placing the lantern on the ground, he said, "Kindly keep an eye out."

Bemused, Matlock scanned the yard all around while Sinclair knelt and reached a hand underneath the frame, just behind the front wheel. Metal clicked sharply. Hearing coins clink, Matlock glanced down as Sinclair removed a purse from a hidden compartment, followed by a packet of papers, which he furtively slipped inside his waistcoat.

Sinclair rose easily to his feet, his smile conspiratorial. "You saw nothing of interest here, Mr. Matlock."

"No, sir. Nothing at all."

Sinclair patted his shoulder. "Good man. I have the feeling you'll go far in this world. Now come inside and have a drink with me."

"Thank you, but I should stay here and keep watch."

"Then I'll have our ale delivered out here. I've had naught but mindless women and lackeys for company these past few days. Dull, dull, dull. You're just the person to relieve my boredom." Another pat on the shoulder, Sinclair beaming with appreciation in the dim light. "In fact, I daresay you and I shall become friends."

Matlock smiled back. After Sinclair left, his smile ebbed into a look of cold calculation. He brushed off his shoulder where Sinclair had touched him, his hand then straying to his pistol grip. "Don't count on it."