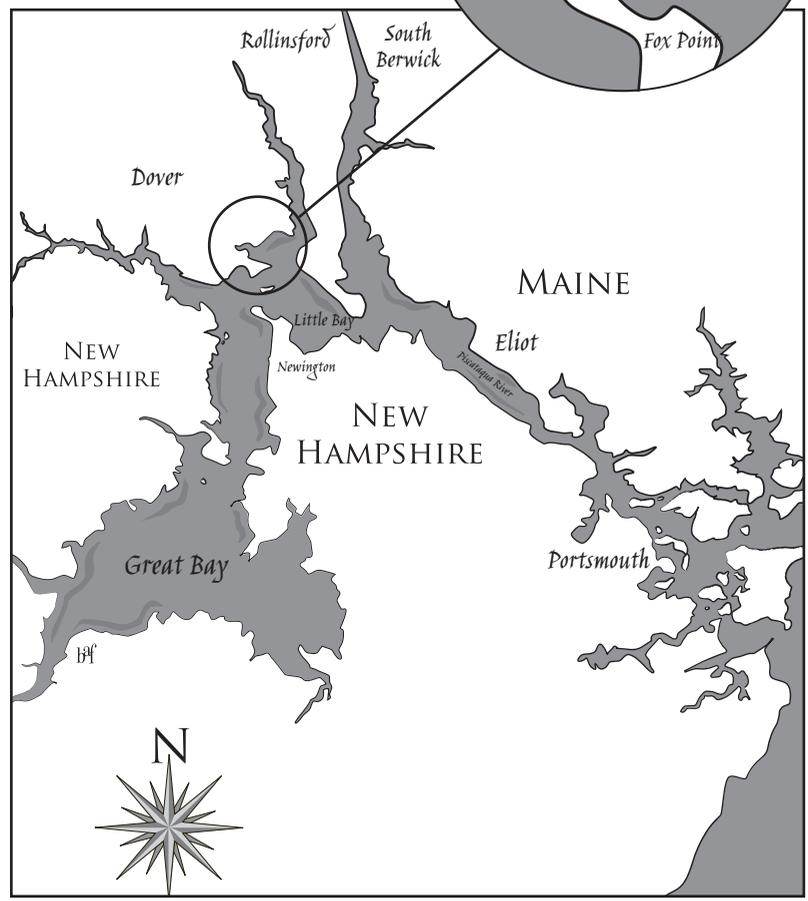
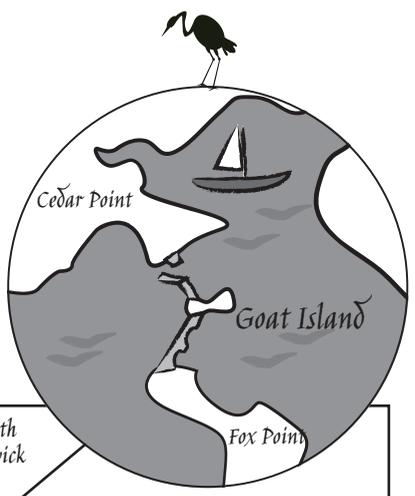
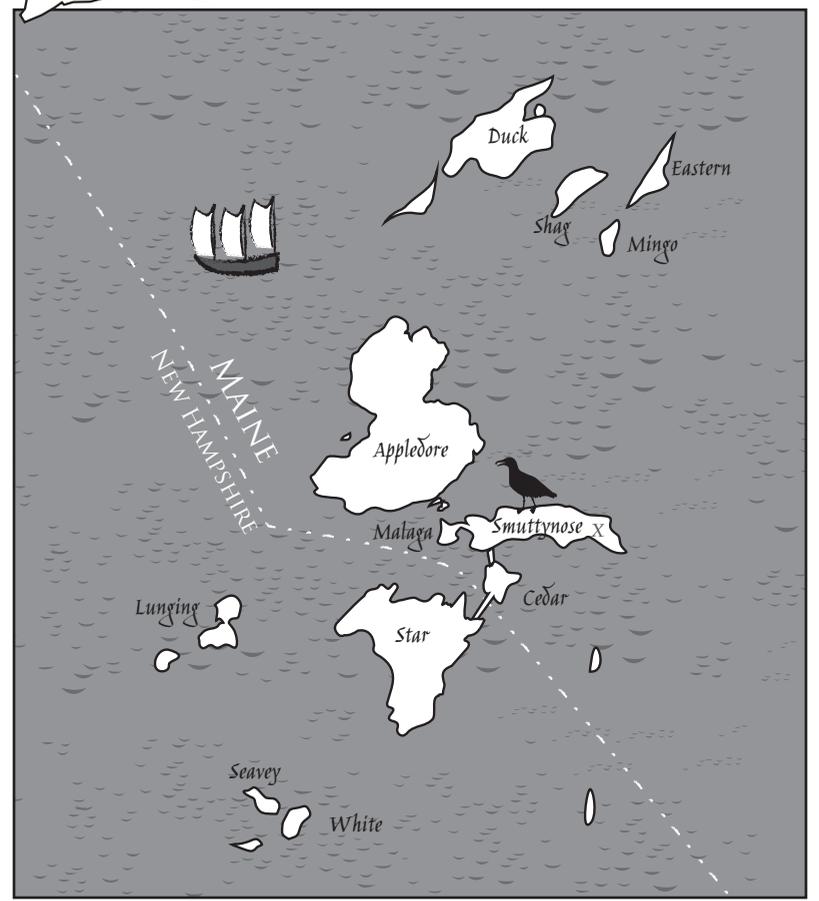


SEACOAST NEW HAMPSHIRE & SOUTHERN MAINE



The Isles of Shoals



Fall 1854

CHAPTER 1

The old madam was spitting mad when they left five years ago. Now here Odette sits in the front parlor of their home—seemingly a world away but really only a few blocks from the whorehouse.

“You’ll be back,” she had warned. “All the girls come begging sooner or later. You and that little shit bastard you’re carrying won’t be able to find any respectable man to take care of you.”

“That’s just the thing. I won’t need a man.” Jessamyn flipped her long brown braid and answered with a confidence that she didn’t feel. She had been earning more as an investigator than as a whore lately but still she was unsure.

“Well, don’t think that you can just come back here any old time you want. I need girls who are reliable. And you tell that bitch Sarah that she better grow eyes in the back of her head. I might just tell the authorities about how she arrived on my steps in the first place. Those scars are a dead giveaway.”

She was bluffing. At the time Odette had at least five black and mulatto girls working for her. All of them had run away from something.

It was way too much of a risk to her livelihood to invite the closer look of a slave catcher.

“And you better not be taking any of those fancy French garments that I so generously provided for you and Sarah while you were here. You really are ungrateful little shits.”

Jessamyn’s eyes rolled. “Cruppers, Odette. Those are about as French as you are—made out of cotton sateen from the mills in Dover. I’m pretty sure that Sarah and I won’t be needing your ridiculous underthings. Anyway, if you recall, you docked our pay for those pieces of ticky tack. You wouldn’t know French silk if you were being strangled with it.” She told herself to shut up. The goal was to get out of here with the least amount of drama. They were only moving to Holt Street—not Canada.

The old madam’s stream of tobacco splats about a foot away from the brass spittoon adding a new pattern to the cheap Oriental carpet. Her aim is getting worse and worse.

“I won’t miss that.” Jessamyn thought as she and Sarah walked out the front door of the finest whorehouse in Portsmouth.

And now here Odette sits. Five years later and she’s looking to hire Jessamyn and Sarah.

Sarah couldn’t stomach the thought of meeting with the old madam, so she and Jonah left to dig for clams on the mudflats as soon as the coach arrived.

Jess doesn’t offer tea and sits opposite the old woman in a wingback chair.

The five years have not been kind to the madam. Her once milky skin is now pockmarked and ruddy. She looks like a large pincushion in her silk dress.

“You’ve done very well for yourself Anastasia—I mean Jessamyn. J. Jakes Discrete Inquiries seems to have taken off. I heard that Captain Pritchard even gave you this house,” she says as she waves her hand around the

well-appointed room. “It was his mother’s, right? You must have serviced him really well,” she chuckles.

Even though the gift was payment for locating a shipment of stolen goods for the captain’s company—Jessamyn says nothing in response to the baiting.

“Why are you here, Odette?”

“It’s Suzanne. She’s missing,” the old woman responds.

After five years, Jessamyn still feels the sting of Sweetness’s rejection.

“Why would you care about her being missing? She must have been more trouble than she’s worth lately—with the opium.”

“I’ve grown to care about her like a daughter.”

Jessamyn frowns. Odette was quick to toss out any girl who wasn’t meeting her quota. Sweetness must have still taken clients even though she was out of it most of the time. “When was the last time you saw her?”

“Yesterday.”

“Why do you think she’s missing?” Jess asks. “Maybe she’s with an overnight customer.”

“Since the poppy started, she hasn’t really left the house. All of her clients come to her—and she wouldn’t have scheduled an overnight without telling me,” she adds as an afterthought. “Essie saw her yesterday afternoon in a buggy with Nathan Taylor headed towards Newington.”

“Taylor? That sadistic mutton nob. Didn’t he try to strangle Daisy?”

“That’s him, yes,” the madam replies.

“I thought you threw him out after that.”

A customer had to be pretty bad for Odette to ban them. To this day Daisy speaks with a raspy voice.

“Yes. He hasn’t been around.”

“Could Essie be mistaken?” Jess asks tucking a tendril of hair into her bun.

“No, she was sure. She had her own encounter with him. He scared the shit out of her. She came running home to tell me as soon as she saw him.”

“Did they see her?”

“She says not,” Odette replies. “She says that she hid behind a tree.”

“If they headed through Newington,” Jess muses, “they probably stopped at the Goat Island Tavern. The bridge is the only way across Little Bay. I’ll ride up there this afternoon and see what I can find out.”

“Thank you.” The settee groans as Odette lifts her herself up.

“I charge \$10 per day plus expenses. I’ll need a deposit of \$25 in advance.”

“What do you mean, Jessamyn? I assumed that you would want to find Suzanne as much as I would—you were so close and all.”

Jessamyn’s mind goes back to the time Odette caught her and Sweetness together. She didn’t care that they were lovers. She was infuriated that two of her whores were engaging in an activity that wasn’t making her any money.

“That’s ancient history. This is my business. It’s how Sarah and I earn a living.”

“Is Sarah your new girl?” Odette asks with a smirk.

“No. We’re family. Even after working for you she still prefers men.”

Odette scowls and yells for her driver. “Tot! Take me home and bring Miss Jakes \$25. Be sure and wait for a receipt.”

CHAPTER 2

Jack comes barking to the front door. Sarah and Jonah must not be far behind. The boy tracks mud across the faded Turkish carpet as he chases the terrier through the parlor into the kitchen waving his clamming fork. “Momma! We have a whole bucket full! Sarah let me dig them up.”

Sarah hates clamming. Jessamyn keeps scolding her for tricking Jonah into doing chores she dislikes.

“That’s wonderful, Nah. We’ll have them for dinner. Momma’s going to Newington for work this afternoon and I’ll probably stay over.”

“So, you’re taking the old bitch’s case, huh? What happened? Did she lose something up that enormous ass of hers?” Sarah, dressed in workman’s boots and pants, walks into the kitchen.

“No,” Jess says. “Apparently, Sweetness is missing.”

“Missing? That girl’s been out of it for so long I wouldn’t say she’s been on this earth for a while now.”

“That’s certainly true. This is a little different. Essie saw her in a buggy headed to Newington with Nathan Taylor.”

“Oh dear. I thought we were rid of that donkey prong. Why in God’s creation would Suzanne go with him?” Sarah asks.

"More importantly, why would Odette give a mutton nob?" Jess replies.

"There must be something more here," Sarah says twisting her curly hair between her slender fingers. "The old bitch must be up to something and I bet it's about money."

"That's all she really cares about," Jessamyn agrees.

"Who's Odette?" Jonah asks with eyes big as saucers.

The two women exchange glances. They're always forgetting that they shouldn't talk about cases in front of Nah. He is smart for his five years and remembers everything they say then repeats it verbatim to his friends. It's hard for him to keep pals when their parents find out about Jess and Sarah's past.

"Honey, why don't you take Jack next door to the widow Markwart?" Jess asks. "Come right home after she gives you your cookie."

"Oh!" he replies with a frown. "I always have to leave when you're talking about something good."

"Don't worry, Nah," Sarah laughs as she puts the bucket next to the sink. "Your momma and I will save the interesting topics for you."

Jonah rolls his eyes as he leads the terrier back through the fancy parlor out the front door.

Jess watches them leave. "That dog spends more time over here than at home. Maybe we should think about getting Nah his own pet."

"Are you joking, Jess? This is perfect. A dog without any of the care or feeding. Besides, Mrs. Markwart seems to enjoy visiting with the boy."

"I hope so," Jess says a bit unsure. "Maybe she can watch him for the afternoon. I was thinking that you might check in with the girls at Odette's to see if you can find out anything more about Sweetness."

Sarah replies, "Sure. I'll do that after I review the land deeds for the Bax-

ter case and maybe stop by the Athenaeum."

Jessamyn smiles. Sarah's favorite place in the world is the Portsmouth Athenaeum—the old private library in the center of Market Square—a wealth of book knowledge just waiting for her to discover. She's been going every week for the last five years.

"You don't think you'll be home until tomorrow?" the younger woman asks as she cleans up the muddy trail left by the boy and the dog.

"Well, it's just over seven miles to the tavern," Jess replies dumping the bucket of clams into the lead-lined sink. "If I find out anything I may need to continue on. That is assuming I can figure out where they went, I'll keep following them. I could be gone even longer than just tomorrow. Either way I'll find a way to get word back to you."

Jessamyn pumps water into the sink and scrubs the clams while Sarah stokes the stove. A few potatoes out of the root cellar and a few leaves of lettuce from the glass box in the garden and they'll be ready for supper.

"Mrs. Markwart is so ancient!" Jonah yells on his way into the house. "Momma, did you know that she has almost 50 years? How does anyone get to be that old?"

"Don't die?" Sarah answers with a smile.

Jonah's eyes grow wide again. "How old are you, Momma? You're not going to die, are you?"

"Stop teasing your brother, Sarah. To answer your question Nah, I'm 27 and your sister is 20. We have many more years in us, I think."

He seems overwhelmed by this information and sits quietly for a few minutes as Sarah peels the vegetables.

"Keep an eye on those potatoes, Sarah. I'm going upstairs and get my things together for the trip," Jess says.

Jessamyn changes from her dress into men's riding clothes in the room she shares with Jonah. She wishes that she could wear comfortable clothes all the time but has found that people respond better to her questions if she's in a dress. There's something about a woman in pants that causes men to panic. She packs up a dress and petticoats just in case she needs them.

"What a pain in the crupper. Lady wear takes up too much room." She unpacks it all and throws it onto the faded blue wingback chair near the bureau.

She catches a glimpse of herself in the discolored framed mirror above the dresser. Her brown hair is astray—her bun lopsided with half of it falling down her back.

"I need to do something about that." She pulls all of the pins out of her hair before she brushes it and quickly works it into a braid extending to her waist. She picks up the gray men's hat she usually wears in the garden and places it on her head.

"Much better."

She looks at Jonah's bed and notices that his stuffed doll has sprung a leak of cotton. "I'll need to fix that when I get back," she says to herself.

Sarah smiles at her as she passes through the kitchen. "I like the braid. It suits you."

Jess nods and leads Jonah to the barn where she saddles up their black gelding, William Henry Harrison. She leaves blonde Buttercup and the wagon for the others.

"There now, Willie," she coos into his ear as she puts the saddle onto his back. Nah feeds the horse a carrot and he nuzzles the boy's neck in return.

"That tickles, Willie!" Jonah laughs.

"Nah, will you please run upstairs to Sarah's workroom and find me two large sheets of paper?"

They built a room in the loft of the barn as a study of sorts for Sarah's bird studies. Drawings are pinned up covering the walls. A bird skeleton lays flat on a table with an array of seashells and feathers. A small wood burning stove sits in the corner next to a ragged settee covered with an old patchwork quilt.

Ordinarily Jonah is not allowed in this space. He tiptoes in and picks up two sheets from the stack on Sarah's table.

The stairs creak as he returns and hands his mother the paper. She folds them into half and half again so she can tuck them into her saddle bag.

"I just need to tie it all to Willie and I'll be all ready, Jonah."

"Can I help?" he asks—eager to show off his new knot tying skills.

"Of course, Nah, remember how I showed you—around the tree and through the rabbit hole."

"You're silly momma," he says as he rolls his eyes. "There's no tree and no rabbit. There's just string."

He ties the saddle bag and races for the house. Jess chuckles as she unties the mess he's made and starts over. "He's really not much for knots, is he?"

She pats Willie's nose, gives him a kiss then leads him into the sunny small garden between the house and barn.

"Don't worry Mr. President, I'll be back in a bit and we'll be on our way."

Jess notices some late season carrots in the garden and pulls them up. Jonah and Sarah can have them while she is gone.

Her daughter has set the simple wooden kitchen table—they never use the fancy dining room often—except to lay out some curtains in need of repair when they first moved in.

The steamers taste salty and delicious even without the butter that Sarah forgot to buy on her way home from the library the other day. Nah's

appreciation of the mollusks has grown since his sister taught him how to dig them up a few weeks ago. He slurps them happily while Sarah and Jess make a plan for the week.

“So once I have the documents for the Baxter case do you want me to put them in the mail or have a courier take them to Boston?” Sarah asks.

“I think the mail will be fine,” Jess replies. “There really isn’t anything confidential in them. They just confirm the details of the original contract.”

“It will be nice to get the final payment,” Sarah says. “We could sure use the money.”

“Amen to that, Sarah.”

CHAPTER 3

Jessamyn hugs Sarah and Jonah goodbye and checks her saddlebag to be sure that everything is in order before heading on her way.

“Be nice to your sister while I’m gone, Nah.”

“Brodie says that Sarah can’t be my sister.”

“Why is that?” Jess asks.

“He said because she ain’t the right color.”

“First of all,” Sarah says, “never say that word ‘ain’t.’ Only unsophisticated country people say that word. Second of all, do we have the same last name?”

“Jakes? Yup.”

“That means we’re family. You tell that pipsqueak Brodie to mind his own business.”

Jessamyn laughs. “Remember, Nah? I told you the story of how we chose Sarah to be part of our family.”

She was able to adopt Sarah officially and change her name even though she’s only seven years younger. She is carefully building a documented history with their new identities. Of course, there was a little finessing of the paperwork to make it go through.

Sarah and Jonah walk next door to Mrs. Markwart’s house as Jessamyn

leads Willie to the front of the house on Holt Street.

The sun is warm on Jess's back. Even though it's October, it feels more like an early September day. Usually, there would be snow on the ground by now. She looks back at the white clapboard house that they have called home for the last five years. "I suppose the place looks a little run down. At the very least the front door could use some new black paint," she mumbles.

She spies her neighbor across the street, Reverend Hobson, just as he leaves the rectory behind the stone church.

"Hello Jessamyn."

She tips her hat. "Reverend Hobson."

"Headed out of town?"

"Well, you know..." She prefers that the preacher knows none of her business, so she doesn't elaborate.

The reverend has spent much effort over the last five years trying to shame Sarah and Jess into attending services.

"Pray tell your business today?"

"Well reverend. Nice of you to ask." But of course, it's not. It's just plain rude. "I'm actually headed to Market Square to meet with my pastor, The Right Reverend Howard Bunford Cheney. He's been offering my family spiritual guidance at the West Church."

"Ah, Cheney." Hobson grimaces at the sound of his rival's name and raises an eyebrow in disdain. They have been in a Puritan Holy War for years over patrons—their two parishes being only a few blocks apart. Jess takes great pleasure in needling the clergyman. She might even have to attend services at the West Church one Sunday just to irk her neighbor.

Not that Reverend Cheney is any less onerous as far as she can see. He's just a little farther away—a half a mile to be exact.

Putt, the caretaker, emerges from the church with a bucket and a mop. His eyes light up when he sees her.

"Hello Miss Jess. How are you today?"

"Better now that I've seen you, Putt. You've improved the state of company exponentially."

The gentle giant shows his gap-toothed smile. "I don't know what that means Miss Jessamyn, but I'm glad to hear it."

She whispers to the young man. "Psst. How much is he paying you, Putt?"

"Paying me? You mean like money? The reverend don't pay me. I get to live in his shed for free."

She makes a mental note. Another reason to hate Reverend Knacker Sweat.

"I don't know why you talk to that simpleton," Hobson says as he follows her down the road.

"All creatures are equal in the eyes of God, aren't they reverend?"

He scowls and walks away.

Instead of heading west towards Newington she trots a few hundred yards towards downtown for the benefit of the old man.

It takes her a couple of hours to reach Newington. She plans to arrive later in the day—early enough to have daylight to look around and late enough to not seem suspicious about staying the night. Early travelers typically would cross the tavern bridge and keep heading to the larger town of Dover where there are many more options for supper and lodging.

The sun is low in the sky as she passes through the town center which is really just a white church and the small town hall. She says hello to a woman using the carved step rock to mount her saggy, cream-colored horse.

A few minutes later she crosses the bridge—a beautiful span with stone arches—from Fox Point to Goat Island. She deposits a penny in the toll box

and approaches her destination.

The tavern is a two-story yellow clapboard house with a small barn and an outbuilding. The nearest neighbors, the Bunkers, occupy a farm across a second bridge to Cedar Point.

Smoke from the fire reaches her nose—it smells like oyster stew cooking. There's a horse tied up on the side of the building. No sign of a buggy or wagon. If Suzanne and Taylor were here, they aren't anymore.

"Hello!" Jess calls as she opens the front door.

She hears giggling from the back room and decides to take a seat at the table by the stove rather than intrude upon a private moment. The pot of stew simmers on top. Her stomach growls. It feels like a long time since dinner. The tavern is known for tasty, hearty fare. She makes a mental note to take some of their bread back to Nah and Sarah.

The room is plain but tidy with whitewashed walls, pine floors and modest adornments. A braided rug lies in front of a faded peach settee situated under the stairwell near the kitchen door.

A pink, round-faced, blonde woman stumbles into the room adjusting her apron followed by a tall, sandy haired man in working man's clothes. He nods and darts out the front door.

"Hello. May I help you?" the woman asks.

"Yes please. I'm Jessamyn Jakes. I'm hoping for a room for the night."

"Yes ma'am. I'm Matie Simpson. My husband, Samuel, will be right out to stable your horse. It will just be a few moments while I get your room ready. There's cider warming on the stove if you'd like some while you wait."

Jess ladles herself a mug of the warm cider and settles in at the table. She pulls out the paper from her bag and sharpens the tip of her pencil with her knife, carefully tosses the shavings into the front door of the stove.

She notices a portrait on the wall of a distinguished looking couple in their Sunday best.

"Interesting painting," she says as Matie walks back in the room.

"My parents. That was their wedding portrait."

The innkeeper stands at the bottom of the stairs rubbing her belly absentmindedly.

"The room rate is a dollar. That includes supper and breakfast. Payment up front." She looks down. "We've had some problems collecting in the morning lately."

"That sounds fine." She hands over a dollar. "Say, a friend of mine was on her way through here yesterday."

"Hmmm. A couple came through last night. The woman was a blonde frail thing."

"Yes, that sounds like her. Suzanne?"

"I never caught her first name. Lafferty was their last name. Sorry to tell you but your friend looked poorly when she was here. She and her husband only stopped because she was ill. He took her right upstairs. I brought some food up for her when he came downstairs to drink ale."

"Did her husband say anything to you?" Jess asks.

"Nothing. He just grunted at the ale and stew. It seemed best to avoid him—I'm sorry if he was your friend—he was a bit out of sorts. I made my husband bring him a second helping when he called for it."

"No, I don't really know him. His wife was my friend from years ago."

"Ma'am, your horse is in the barn for the night." A heavysset bald man in a dark workman's coat fills the front door.

"This is my husband, Samuel," Mrs. Simpson's eyes never leave Jess's face.

"Very nice to meet you, Samuel," Jessamyn nods at the couple. His wife's

face relaxes into a smile. “I’ll just drop some things in my room and take a walk around the island before supper.”

The woman shows her up the stairs to one of two small bedrooms.

“I do love my husband,” she says quietly once they are in the room.

“It’s none of my business, ma’am. I don’t judge others.” Jess smiles.

“We have an understanding.”

The innkeeper seems to want to explain but Jess would prefer to keep the conversation on the case.

“Really ma’am—back to your guests. Did you see them again?”

“What? Oh no, I came in from the barn around midnight and heard the front door shut. I looked outside but didn’t see anything. Then later, before first light, there was a series of bumps—like someone was dragging a bag down the stairs and out the door. They were gone when we rose at dawn.”

CHAPTER 4

Sarah avoids the main streets in Portsmouth as she makes her way to Odette’s. She’ll never feel totally safe with the crowds even though it’s been nine years since she arrived here. She has too much to lose now to do something stupid. Luckily, Portsmouth is a rough seaport town with people from all over the world. There are lots of women and men of every color. Still, it pays to be careful.

She stops to straighten her bonnet and smooths her simple yellow dress before she enters Odette’s via the back entrance into the kitchen.

“Sarah!” Moira, the round smiling cook looks up from her table. “I haven’t seen you in an age. Granny, take these biscuits to the oven and keep an eye on them while we chat.”

A small dark-haired girl of about ten picks up the tray and scurries off to the oven behind the house. Her oversized shoes slap the stone floor as she makes her way.

“Granny? That’s a strange name for a child,” Sarah says.

“Her real name is spelled G-r-a-i-n-n-e—pronounced ‘grawn-ya.’ Nobody can pronounce it except for me so now she’s just ‘Granny.’”

“At least she doesn’t have a whore name.”

“Yet—that will come soon enough. So, what’s up, lamb chop? Usually Jess comes to pick up any new tidbits of information. Why are you here?”

“She has other business today. I’m here because Odette came by our

house. She wants us to look for Suzanne.”

“Oh, monkey balls.” Moira rolls her eyes and hands her a cup of tea.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Sweetness hasn’t been right in the head since you and Jess left. The opium has just made it worse. I’m not sure that looking for her is worth your time.”

“Was she meeting her numbers?” Sarah asks blowing on the tea to cool it before taking a tentative sip.

“Hell no. I’ve no idea why Odette hasn’t tossed her out before now. She’s not one for sentimentality.”

“She says that Suzanne is like a daughter to her,” Sarah says.

Moira spews tea out of her mouth across the worn wooden counter top. “Are you kidding me? That’s the funniest thing I’ve heard all day.”

“We thought that sounded like periwinkle piss. So, why does she care if Suzanne left?”

“Who knows? Maybe the old rumors are true,” Moira says as she rolls out the next round of dough—not bothering to wipe the the tea from the board.

“Are you talking about the stories about Odette’s stash?” Sarah asks. “Do you really think she has a chest of jewels and coins hidden somewhere?”

Moire says, “Well, I suppose it would explain a lot if Sweetness stole it. What I don’t understand about that theory is why would Odette stick around here if she was sitting on a pile of money?”

“Good point. I have to admit that for the three years I was here I dug through every orifice in this house and didn’t find a thing.”

“Orifice? Jesus, Mary and Joseph, you are getting smart. What the hell is an orifice?”

“A hole,” Sarah replies laughing.

“Why not just say hole? Seems kind of unnecessary to fancy it up like

that. Whatever you call it, you and every other girl has done the same. None of them ever left for something better except for you and Jess, so nobody must have found anything. If there is a treasure somewhere it must not be in this house.”

Moira’s right. Most of the girls who left Odette’s ended up in the less desirable houses on Water Street such as Sally Lightfoot’s or The Randy Piddock.

“Who knows?” Sarah continues. “Did any of the girls have much to say about the day Suzanne went missing?”

The servant girl walks back in the kitchen with the hot biscuits. Moira sees Sarah lick her lips.

“Granny, pack some of those up for Miss Sarah to take with her.”

“Yes ma’am,” the small girl replies.

“And take a few for yourself.”

The young lass grins.

“They’ll be no talking of this to the girls or to Miss Odette.”

“Yes ma’am.” She wraps the biscuits and hands Sarah her bundle.

“Now be a love and go to Fogarty’s cart to buy some pickled eggs. We’re near out and Odette likes them for dinner.”

Granny smiles shyly and walks out the door.

“She’s very young,” Sarah observes. “When is that old bag of snakes going to auction off her cherry?”

“She wanted to do it this year, but I think we’ve talked her out of it. With more Irishmen coming every day she’ll get more cash the longer she waits—a sweet young lass like that.”

Sarah shudders at the memory of her own auction. She hadn’t even started her monthlies yet.

“So, what have the girls been saying?”

“Mostly that Odette hired Nathan Taylor to take Sweetness away to get rid of her.”

“That does sound like something she would do,” Sarah says settling down on the familiar worn stool.

“The afternoon girls will be coming down any minute for their shift. Why don’t you stick around? You can ask them yourself.”

One of the reasons Odette’s has been so successful is that it’s organized like a factory—complete with shifts. Odette charges customers more who want to see a particular girl off hours—not that she shares any of the additional profit. Higher earning ladies are rewarded with the better shifts. Of course, in a seafaring town who’s to say what the good time slots are? Ships arrive at all time of night or day. Sometimes it’s busiest at 5:30 in the morning.

There’s not a lot of longevity in the whore business. Sarah only recognizes two of the five girls that wander in for tea. Essie and Daisy each hug her. All the girls have inexpensive cotton lace corsets over faded shifts. A few wrap themselves in tattered floral shawls. The others hover near the stove to keep warm.

“Well if it isn’t the bitch who got away,” a tall buxom redhead calls from the doorway. She’s dressed better than the other girls with French undergarments and a silk green robe that matches her eyes.

“Hello Savannah,” Sarah says blandly.

“Hello Désirée,” the redhead replies.

“It’s Sarah now, Sarah Jakes.”

“Sure—sure, it is,” Savannah says as she thrusts her hip out. “What are you doing here? The old lady always said you’d be back sometime. I guess

she was right. Are you working this shift? You’ll need to change out of that potato sack and freshen up your mutt face.”

“Give it a rest, Savannah,” Moira interrupts.

“Aren’t you a little long in the tooth for this work?” Sarah replies. “I mean I’ve seen cows with perkier tits than yours.”

“Savannah is still one of the top earners,” Moira says, trying to keep the peace. The truth is that she has one regular client every Wednesday who is so afraid of exposure that he pays Odette four times the going rate. Only Odette and Savannah know who he is.

“Sarah is here to look into Sweetness’s disappearance,” Moira continues.

“Why?” Savannah asks. “Who cares about that bitch leaving?”

Sarah can tell this conversation is a big mistake. She’s going to be better off speaking to Daisy and Essie alone. “I’m an old friend of hers and I’m worried about her going off with Taylor.”

Daisy stiffens with the mention of Taylor’s name.

Savannah rolls her eyes. “If you’re so concerned about Sweetness, where the hell have you been for the last five years?”

“I think it’s time you girls assembled in the front parlor. Odette will be off her chump if any of you are late.”

With Moira’s warning they slowly make their way to the front to start their day.

Sarah taps one of the girls on the shoulder. “Essie, do you have a moment to speak?”

She looks shyly from under a mop of black curls. “I guess so.”

“I understand that you saw Suzanne and Taylor together the other day.”

She retreats behind her curls. The only thing visible is her pale nose.

“I...I guess I did.”

“Where did you see them, Essie?” Sarah asks quietly.

“Near the docks—you know—Water Street,” she answers retreating behind her hair.

“So Essie, you didn’t see them leaving town headed west in a wagon?”

“Oh wait! That’s where I saw them. Yep. On their way somewhere far away or something. In a wagon.”

“So where exactly were you?” Sarah asks.

“Watching them leave town. In a wagon,” the girl replies nodding.

It’s obvious to Sarah why Essie never achieved her dream of becoming an actress.

“Thanks Essie! You’ve been so much help.” Sarah gives her a hug.

She smiles and sighs with relief that their talk is over.

When not working the girls sleep in a dormitory style room in the basement of the house. There they each have their own old sailor chest with a padlock for a few personal belongings. The girls call them the “Life Before” or “libee” chests. The relics of their previous lives are kept away from prying eyes. Every girl gets a new name and a new backstory when she enters the house. Sarah’s alter ego, “*Désirée*,” was supposed to be from New Orleans where her daddy was a pirate and her mother was a Creole princess.

Odette crafts the biographies and the names according to the whims of her customers. She always has a country girl like Daisy, a southern belle like Savannah, and some variation of French royalty like Esmé—who much to Odette’s horror—became “Essie” almost immediately. One poor girl was dubbed the “Nubian Princess” and was supposed to speak in some made up African language even though she was born in Portland.

Everything outside the libee belongs to the house. When a girl leaves Odette opens the chest with her master key and takes what she wants of

anything that is left. The rest is distributed to the remaining girls in order of their earnings. Everything happens in that order. From picking clothes to shifts to bathing times—everything.

Sarah slips downstairs to the dormitory. She can hear Odette bellowing instructions to the girls starting their workday. A schooner arrived from New Bedford last night so they’re in for a lot of customers. She shudders with the memory of those days. Barely enough time to clean up between clients. It’s a miracle she and Jess emerged without any long-term effects. It’s due to Jess’s diligence in insisting that Odette purchase the highest quality condoms from New York and that all the girls wear them. A certain Mrs. Goldstein of Brooklyn made so much money manufacturing johnnies for Odette that she was able to buy her own brownstone.

In spite of all that, little Nah was conceived.

The girls who just came off shift are already sleeping under tattered woolen blankets. Four small high windows provide the only light. She makes her way to Suzanne’s libee. It takes her less than ten seconds to pick the lock.

When she lived here she knew what was in every single one of these chests. Some of the girls had letters which Sarah couldn’t read but assumed were from long departed family, husbands or lovers. Others contained inexpensive jewelry, plain or homespun dresses and other artifacts from their lives before Odette’s.

Sarah’s chest contained only one thing—a hand bill advertising a reward for a missing house slave named Esther. It was the first thing that Jess taught her to read.

Five years ago they looked at the likeness one last time and burned it in the fireplace of their new home on Holt Street. Jess thought it was just too dangerous to keep around.

She opens the chest under Suzanne's bed. The contents are largely the same as the last time she looked eight years ago—velvet ribbons, bits of yellowing lace, and a broken fan. The only new item being a small opium pipe.

“Now why would Sweetness leave the pipe behind?” she asks herself.

The only thing missing—the small prayer book with a ripped leather cover.

CHAPTER 5

He only has ten cents to his name. Enough for a shave or a drink. What he really wants is a whore. One he could squeeze the life out of as he fucked her. One dime wasn't going to pay for that. He toys with the idea of grabbing one of the mill girls and taking her out of town. He sits and nurses his drink as he watches a pair of the Megeso Mill private detectives walk the neighborhood. With the Dover police turning out to be such a sorry lot, the mills have taken the law into their own hands.

The private security force is modeled after the highly effective Pinkerton's of Chicago. The mill owners know that Ma and Pa Farmer are not going to send their daughters to work in Dover if it isn't safe. They even run company owned brothels—sad, functional affairs—nothing compared to the raunchy selection on the coast.

There's no private police force in Portsmouth. The shipbuilders don't give a shit about the safety of farmers' daughters.

He wasn't starving. He'd stolen that loaf of bread from the old farmhouse with the carved cow head on it. He beat a hasty retreat before he could look for whiskey when he heard rustling upstairs.

Nursing his drink, he contemplates his next move. Maybe he should just

get the hell out of New Hampshire. Boston would be an easy place to go unnoticed as he earns himself a living. He imagines there are many fine houses to break into.

There has to be lots of disposable women there too.

A pack of mill girls giggle as they walk by the front door.

“Bitches,” Taylor says under his breath.

“Excuse me sir?” asks the freckle-cheeked bartender.

“Those girls there. They think they’re so much better than any of us.”

“Whatever you say, sir,” the bartender says moving away.

“Always laughing at the likes of you and me,” Taylor says wiping his nose on his dirty handkerchief and taking a swig of his drink.

The bartender knows it’s time to cut him off—not because he’s drunk but because he can see that he’s nearly out of money.

“Say friend. You seem like you have a beef with someone. Maybe you should talk to them about it.” Or at least get the hell out of here. The young barkeep heads to the back room and Taylor grabs the whiskey bottle on his way out the door—not bothering to leave the dime he owes.

His wagon is where he left it in the alley. The broken-down horse whinnies at him. Taylor swats him.

“Shut the fuck up. Maybe I should just dump this rig and ride you to Boston.” He takes another look at the saggy nag and decides that he’s better off with the wagon.

At the top of a hill and is greeted with a view of rolling farmland all the way to the Salmon Falls River glistening below. South Berwick, Maine, lies just on the other side. The swaying amber grasses lull him into sleepiness.

Pulling off the road he unhitches the horse and cobbles him so he can take a nap.

CHAPTER 6

The sky turns pink as a seal enjoys the last bit of the sun’s warmth atop a rock pile.

Jess walks halfway across the industrial drawbridge from Goat Island to Cedar Point. What the bridge lacks in grace is made up with strength. The water rushes below with furious power. It’s so loud that she doesn’t hear Mrs. Simpson call her name until the woman is right beside her.

“Sorry to startle you, Miss Jakes.”

“Jessamyn, please. It’s so loud I didn’t hear you walk up.”

“This is quite the bridge. Twice a day Great Bay empties and fills back up around this island. All that water coming through a pretty small hole. That’s why it’s sixty feet deep here.”

“Really? It’s hard to believe.”

“Yes. Maybe it’s my imagination but sometimes I think I can feel the bridge move under my feet.”

“It seems pretty solid. It’s made out of oak and granite, right?”

“Yes. I actually didn’t come out here to talk about the bridge.”

“You really needn’t explain about your relationship with your husband.”

“I want to tell you. I don’t want you to get the wrong idea about me—

about us. Besides, I need to tell someone and you look like the type of woman who can keep a secret.”

Jess smiles. “Of course, but only if it will make you feel better.”

Matie wraps her shawl around her shoulders and begins, “I am the second Mrs. Simpson. Samuel was first married to a woman named Anne.”

Jessamyn smiles and nods.

“They tried for many years to have a child to no avail. Finally, one day Anne announced that she was pregnant.”

“Uh oh,” Jess mutters.

Matie blushes and looks down. “Yes. She also told him that she was leaving. She had fallen in love with a Canadian trader and was moving to Manitoba.”

“Oh dear,” Jess replies.

“Samuel told me all of this when we were courting. He also told me that he wants a child more than anything else. We’ve been trying for ten years—ever since we bought the tavern. He’s a smart enough man to recognize that the problem was his and not Anne’s—or mine.”

“Most men wouldn’t have accepted that knowledge.”

“I know. Samuel is special,” the innkeeper says.

“He must be,” Jess exclaims. “It’s funny how men claim they can’t father a child when a whore comes up in trouble but it’s the wife’s fault when they can’t sire a child.”

Matie gives her a strange look.

Jess changes the subject. “So, how did Stephen come into the picture?”

“He was a guest who stayed with us one night over the summer. He was looking for employment and we hired him to help with the tavern. He daydreams sometimes—but he’s mostly a good worker.”

“And pretty to look at.”

Matie blushes. “That’s true. I love his soft blonde beard.”

A large flock of starlings swoops along the bay and rises to pass directly over their heads. The whoosh of their wings temporarily drowns out the sound of the rushing water. The cloud dances around the sky across Little Bay and towards the Piscataqua River.

“I wish Sarah were here,” Jessamyn says.

“Sarah?”

She smiles. “My daughter. She’s interested in birds. She would have loved that. I’m sorry to interrupt you. You were telling me about Stephen.”

“After a month or so Samuel asked Stephen to join us in the sitting room after dinner. He poured us each a glass of the rum he saves for special occasions—then he poured us each a second one.”

Jessamyn nods to the smaller woman.

“Samuel laid out an arrangement for Stephen,” she continues.

“What sort of arrangement?”

“Stephen is to be paid \$50 upon the delivery of a healthy baby.”

After living at Odette’s it’s hard to surprise Jess anymore but she has to cough to suppress a laugh.

“I know it’s strange,” Matie says laughing. “I’m no longer a regular scripture reader but this doesn’t seem quite right to me.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Jess says. “My only concern is that after the child has some years behind him won’t he wonder about all of this? What if he looks like Stephen? What are you going to tell him about his father?”

“That’s the thing. After the baby survives to six months Stephen is to leave and not return. Samuel is hoping that I will be with child again by the time he departs.”

“An heir and a spare.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s what royalty says about the duty of queens. They are to give birth to the heir to the throne and then another boy in case the first son dies.”

“How do you know about royalty like that?”

Jessamyn smiles.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Matie says. “Something else happened when your friend was here. I didn’t notice it until this afternoon.”

“What was that?”

“My small bean pot went missing.”

“Are you sure it disappeared while they were here?” Jess asks.

“I’m sure. I used it the morning of their arrival and it was put away in the pantry that afternoon. Samuel and Stephen know there will be hell to pay if they touch any of my kitchen things.”

“Interesting.”

“I wonder why they would steal a bean pot?”

CHAPTER 7

Sarah rushes to the deeds office to research the Baxter land estate case. She can skip the bakery now that she has the biscuits, but she wants to make time for her favorite weekly stop, the Atheneum.

The repository has been around since 1817 and Capt. Pritchard is member number 346. He listed Sarah as a relative so that she can visit whenever she wishes.

She enters the double doors off Market Square into a grand, paneled room. Sliding ladders run along shelves filled with leather-bound books. She breathes deeply. Jess always laughs at the way she smells books. “It’s like you’re trying to inhale all the knowledge.”

Old Reverend Cheney sits at one of the gleaming dark wood tables and smokes his pipe reading the latest news from Boston. He harrumphs as she passes.

She goes directly to the second floor where her friend, George Beaudette, works as a reference librarian. The walls of the small cluttered office are covered with bookshelves in complete disarray. Sarah teases him about it but he insists that he’s able to find any volume in a few minutes. Somehow he has managed to squeeze in a small worktable as well. A pile of books sits waiting for her as usual.

He smiles shyly over his glasses pushing his brown hair behind his ears. “Hello Sarah. I found a couple of tomes for you on the migratory patterns of the yellow crowned heron. You can even take them with you. Migration is not a popular topic with the membership.”

“Thanks George. I’ll read them this week,” Sarah says as she takes three volumes out of her bag. “I really enjoyed the book about the songbirds of southern Italy. I can’t say that I liked *Oliver Twist* as much—the fairy tale ending and such. It didn’t seem very realistic to me. Nobody’s life ends up like that—all tied up nicely with string.”

She prefers nonfiction as a general matter, but he always tries to slip some novels from the library’s small collection in there as well. He has Thoreau’s *Walden* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* on her pile for this week. Mostly he just wants to talk with her about more than birds.

George has never asked Sarah about her past. He heard from one of the shipbuilders about her time at Odette’s but he makes no judgement about it. His own fisherman father died when he was very young, and his mother struggled to raise him and keep him in school. Sometimes money appeared without explanation. He learned to not ask too many questions.

One day she came home and told him to dress in his Sunday clothes and to go speak with Mr. Quimby at the Atheneum about a job sweeping up. That was ten years ago. Now, Stevie McGann does the sweeping up and George is the reference librarian.

It’s his turn to take care of his mother now.

They live in a small set of rooms above Carbew’s bakery on Wren Street and she happily spends her time with cross stitch and cooking. With their continued frugality he has even managed to accumulate a small nest egg on his librarian’s salary.

Sarah sits at the worktable and starts where she always does with the oversized folio of *The Birds of America* by John James Audubon. She pulls out a large piece of paper and a pencil.

“What’s the lucky bird this week, Sarah?”

“I think it will be the kingfisher.”

“Ah, a fine selection. Are you wavering from your heron track?”

She laughs showing her pretty white teeth. George dreams about her smile every night.

“No, not at all. Did I tell you that I found a fresh dead heron and was able to do a series of close ups as it was decaying!”

“That’s amazing.” George is in awe of this girl. He never met anyone who was excited to find a dead bird.

She pulls out the large print of the kingfisher and begins sketching. First, she does a quick copy and then close ups of details like the eyes, feathers and beaks. She makes notes alongside the drawings. With local birds she’ll later add information about sightings and their environment.

She loves all birds, but her favorite is still the great blue heron.

She has spent hundreds of hours observing and drawing the majestic fowl. She and Jonah combed the area and discovered a hidden spot by the water where they can watch them wade on the mudflats. When the herons are engaged with fishing they’re much more amenable to posing.

She’s so absorbed that she doesn’t notice George stealing glances at her as she works. He loves watching her. She’s so engrossed. The cinnamon, heart-shaped birthmark on her cheek moves up and down as she frowns—trying to get some detail exactly right.

The hanging wall clock dings at 4 p.m. and jars her out of her trance.

“Oh flap doodle! I’ve got to get home for Jonah!” She springs up and fills

her bag with the stack of books.

“Thanks, George!” she says on her way out the door.

“Will I see you soon?” he calls after her.

“I think so. Jessamyn has some more business for me so I’ll be back in a couple of days.”

“Goodbye, Sarah.” He slumps back in his chair.

“Bye!” With that she darts down the back stairs into the alley.

CHAPTER 8

The regular closes the door behind him and Savannah lays back on the blue lacy pillows. She has about fifteen minutes before Odette comes and kicks her out of the room. Her shift is over and she should make her way back to the dormitory. First, she’ll go down and eat her fill of the biscuits Moira made this afternoon. She shouldn’t eat too many or she’ll get fat. Of course, the customers don’t seem to give a natty bit if she’s fat. The regular seems to like the fact that her breasts are getting larger and larger. He doesn’t seem to care about her belly catching up to them.

Today was the same as usual with him. Starting with spanking—his ass, her riding crop. Sucking—her tits, his sour smelling bone box. Poking—his ass, her special-order French dingedong. Wrap it all up with some dirty talk and more spanking. She barely has to touch his roly poly before he shoots his milt—it really is the easiest money she earns.

Usually, at this time of the week she’s content. She’s once again solidified her place as the top earner of the house and even has some extra cash to buy lingerie of her own—real silk and not that cheap sateen the rest of the girls wear. Her libee chest is filled with nice things.

It’s that Désirée/Sarah that has her mood darkened. How is it that

Anastasia, or Jessamyn as she's currently known, has been able to leave Odette's and not ended up in the gutter? Sarah looked good. She didn't look at all like she was sleeping rough—she even still has those pretty white teeth. How are they doing it all without a man to support them?

"Maybe it's time that I find myself some ticket out of here," she thinks. "If those two can become respectable in this town, anyone can." Not that she cares one monkey ding about respectability. She'll take money over that any day.

She toys with the idea of broaching the topic with the regular next time he's in. Maybe they can work out an arrangement. But can she handle ramming stuff up that wrinkled ass for the rest of her life?

CHAPTER 9

Sarah wakes up with a start. It's Jonah staring at her from the side of the bed. He looks like he has been there for a while as he is shivering in the early morning air.

"You scared me half to death!" she says, "How long have you been standing there?"

"I miss Momma."

"It's OK, sweetie. She'll be home soon. Crawl in bed with me. You're freezing and it's too early to be up anyway."

Maybe she should have slept in Jess's bed last night. Jonah's still pretty little to sleep in his own room. He's so smart that she forgets that he's only five. He snuggles under the covers clutching his injured doll. "Can you fix Mr. Soapy for me?"

"How about I show you how to fix Mr. Soapy so that you can keep him healthy forever yourself?"

"OK. Sewing is kind of a girl thing but doctoring is a boy thing so I guess that would be all right." Sarah rolls her eyes.

They lie cuddled up and watch the pink morning light hit the side of the white clapboard barn across the kitchen garden. It's way past when they