Like an Evening Gone

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Chapter One

BARBADOS 1818

'As the eldest son, I have the right to be first!'

Sending his chair crashing to the veranda floor, Emmanuel Strong staggered drunkenly to his feet and banged the table with both fists.

Opposite him, his back to the trees and the moon, Otis Strong belched, broke wind and shook his head. 'Shame on you, brother; married with two children and contemplating adultery.'

'He needs more practice,' exclaimed Jeb, the youngest, and laughed until the tears rolled down his face. It seemed outrageously funny to him.

The brothers were alike in looks, tall and square-shouldered with golden hair erring towards red and blue eyes that could be as bright as May or cold as December. They were all young, wild to varying degrees, but Emmanuel was the eldest and the dominant male in a pack of young lions. Otis was more lightly built than his older brother, whom he tried to emulate, though being second eldest was second best.

Jeb was last in line with regard to inheriting the immense wealth of the Strong family, so felt no need either to compete with or to respect Emmanuel. In fact he took immense pleasure in mocking his inflated self-esteem. Even now a smile curled his mouth, almost as though he were daring his brother to turn his words into action.

Emmanuel avoided matching Jeb's challenging look, and concentrated his attention on Otis, whom he'd always regarded as overly sensitive. Now he looked at him as if he were a complete fool. 'My wife's not in Barbados,' he snapped. 'I am, and a man has needs.'

Otis grinned hesitantly. 'That's got nothing to do with it. You didn't throw the first six. Whoever throws the first six, usually—'

'Neither did you,' Emmanuel interrupted, his voice and countenance surly with drink.

They both looked to where Jeb sprawled in a chair, grinning. 'To

the victor . . .' he slurred and waved one hand like the conductor of an imaginary orchestra. 'And I will do my best . . .'

Gripping the table for support, he rose unsteadily, almost falling back into his chair as his knees buckled. Always the easygoing one, he laughed at his own ineptitude. 'I don't know that I'll be able, but the prospect of bedding that prettly little mulatto will no doubt encourage Peter the Pistle to rise to the occasion!'

Emmanuel Strong grinned and patted his crotch. 'No matter if you can't manage. I'm sure my own willing member can make up for your shortcomings.'

All three laughed as young men do, when fired up with an over-indulgence of Barbadian rum and the prospect of unfettered sex.

'Then let's to it!' Otis, the middle brother, who was never wild until he'd drunk a few glasses of rum, sent both glasses and bottles crashing to the floor as he reached for a brass bell and rang it vigorously, not stopping until Caradoc, a squat-faced Yuraba appeared, his walnut-coloured skin almost matching his uniform. Butlers, brown suits and gold braid had been unknown in West Africa, the place of his birth, but there had been slave trading, and, as a child, he had been bundled on to a ship along with the tusks of dead elephants. Africa was only a memory. Barbados had sometimes been a nightmare.

At first glance, Caradoc's expression was like that of a goat, placid and unexciting. But if the brothers had been sober they would have seen the contempt in his eyes as he asked them what they wanted.

'Viola!' cried Emmanuel, smacking his hands down on the table, his features sharply accentuated by the candles in front of him. 'I want . . .' He exchanged knowing sneers with his brothers before correcting himself. '*We* want Viola. Fetch her.'

'Not here,' slurred Otis, slicking his long fair hair back behind his ears. Sweat glistened on his high forehead reflecting light from the overhead candelabra. 'And not in the slave quarters either. It stinks. Let's have some comfort. No doubt the bitch will want some too. It's only right if there's three of us.'

A sudden draught disturbed the candle flames. Spirals of black smoke curled up to Emmanuel's face making it seem demonic. His eyes glittered. 'My room, Caradoc. Take her to my room.'

Otis backed down. Even when he was sober, Otis always did when Emmanuel gave orders, mostly because he sounded and looked so much like their father, Sir Samson Strong, who always expected to be obeyed.

The smiling Jeb shook his head. 'No. It stinks of brandy and old farts.'

Emmanuel glared. Unlike Otis who regretted being second son and tried desperately to please both his father and his brother, Jeb was the youngest and would always be overlooked. Therefore, disagreeing with them had become something of a habit.

A deep cleft appeared in Emmanuel's chin as he clenched his jaw, stood straight and clasped his hands behind his back. As the eldest son, he'd been groomed to take over the running of the business and was proud of the fact. Jeb had never been impressed, yet nevertheless, Emmanuel always strived to show him he was as ruthless and powerful as his father. Well he'd damn well impress him now! 'Supreme comfort; Father's bedroom,' he said with obvious relish, his eyes glowing with pride.

Otis smiled nervously, then pushed his hair back from his face, holding on to the sweaty strands as he contemplated the enormity of what Emmanuel suggested and the possible consequences. 'Oh, lord!' he muttered, and chewed his bottom lip until the blood ran.

Jeb, his face pink with drink, had a merry twinkle in his eyes and his smile was almost a smirk. 'You're not the master yet, brother. Take care.'

Emmanuel was incensed. 'Do you not believe I would do it, brother?'

Jeb raised his eyebrows, his cheeks round and shiny. 'You would violate the holy of holies, my brother?'

Emmanuel scowled. 'You mock me!'

Jeb laughed and shook his head. 'No. I dare you.'

Otis attempted to say something, but Emmanuel, angered by Jeb's scorn, fetched him a hefty whack that sent him sprawling to the floor.

'I'm going to be richer and more powerful than my father, damn you! You just see if I'm not!'

He took the stopper off a quarter-full decanter, tipped it up so some of it trickled down his chin, then wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

'Fetch the girl!' Emmanuel aimed a kick at Caradoc but missed. 'Well, get going, man!'

'And bring more rum,' Otis shouted after him.

Emmanuel threw him a withering gaze.

'We've none left,' Otis explained apologetically.

Jeb laughed quietly into his sleeve. What a disparate trio they were. Emmanuel had a need to compete with their father, but didn't even know it, and second son Otis would always consider

himself to be second best, although he was a better man than Emmanuel. And me? thought Jeb. I'm like a pig's tail, pink and curly and stuck on at the end.

He laughed loudly and the sound was infectious. Soon, the others were laughing too, though they hadn't a clue why.

Their laughter followed the butler as he headed into the house and the back stairs that led up to the attic where the female house slaves slept three to a mattress and twelve to a room. He tried not to care about what was about to happen. Hadn't he seen it many times before? Leadenly, he dragged his legs up the winding staircase. There was no door at the top. The stairs spilled directly into the attic.

Little air came through the small windows set into the steep slopes of the mansard roof, a style more suited to the climate of Bath than Barbados. The moment Caradoc approached the room sweat broke out on his face and neck, and trickled into his braided collar. During the day the roof had conducted the heat of the sun. Like a bread oven just after baking, the heat remained, made stale by the sweat of many bodies lying naked and glistening upon the straw-filled mattresses.

Reluctant to enter, he stayed by the stairs and called her. 'Viola!'

Aware that the young masters had been drinking and apprehensive about what was to come, all the women were awake but lying still, waiting to see which of them would be called upon to provide the entertainment. A communal sigh seemed to fall over the room as most of the bodies relaxed. Only one body stiffened.

'Just Viola,' Caradoc added.

Sure now of their rest, sleep came easily for some after a fourteen-hour day of cleaning, cooking and laundering. Others raised their heads and looked to where Viola was rising from her rude bed, their expressions a mix of sympathy and relief.

Viola started to pull a white cotton nightgown over her head.

'That won't be necessary,' said Caradoc, pained that he had to say it but experienced in these things.

The girl looked at him, her eyes blazing. He'd expected her expression to be one of pleading, and was surprised. All the same, he shook his head and murmured, 'I'm sorry.'

Letting the nightgown fall to the ground and holding her head high, she followed him down the narrow staircase, welcoming the cooler air on her body as they got closer to the ground.

He told her to wait outside the door that led to the cellar. Wine, rum and a few kegs of sherry were stored there, the latter, along with flour, tea, fine clothes and fancies, brought over with the

supplies from Bristol every three months or so. Although far from home, Rivermead House was as well stocked as Marstone Court, the Strong estate near the City of Bristol.

At last Caradoc emerged with a bottle of dark green glass, its neck narrow and its base balloon-shaped. 'Follow me,' he said without looking at her, steeling himself to cope, though it was her ordeal not his. Unlike other women and girls summoned like this, Viola showed no fear; in fact, something seemed to tick in her eyes. He felt she was measuring him up and, despite his stoic exterior, could read his thoughts.

There's nothing I can do, he told himself, nothing at all. He was just a slave, had been for most of his life, and would probably remain so. Thinking of what little life he had left triggered a deeply felt anger, an anger that had lain dormant for years.

Are you not a man? he asked himself. He'd heard that saying often of late, the confident chants of the abolitionists, unafraid in the face of men like Samson Strong.

Are you not a man?

In name, he *was* a man. But in deed? A eunuch, he thought. It was a word he remembered in tales passed from slave to slave, generation to generation. He'd heard of eunuchs in North African harems, there to protect the women, but not able to love them as a man should; just slaves, men whose penises and testicles had been cut off before puberty, now able only to pee through straws. That's how he was feeling now, like a eunuch, incapable of being anything but a slave.

Head bowed, Caradoc took Viola back up the wide staircase, where oak balustrades had been painted to look like stone, along to the wide mahogany door where light from the room within seeped on to the first-floor landing.

He knocked, entered and placed the bottle of rum onto a large satinwood chiffonier the young men's grandfather had broght out from England.

The room fell to silence. Emmanuel Strong stood behind a settee. Without taking his eyes off the naked Viola, he unfastened the mother-of-pearl buttons on his waistcoat.

Otis Strong was sprawled on the settee, smoking a large cigar, determined to emulate his elder brother. His eyes flickered as he gazed through the smoke. Viola stood in the doorway, looking incredibly desirable and without the slightest sign of fear. Otis gulped. She was not what he'd expected.

Jeb had already passed out. He was slumped in a chair, his head back and one leg crooked over the arm. He was snoring loudly.

Emmanuel Strong lay down on the bed, his head resting on his hand. He patted the woven cotton coverlet. 'Over here, my dear. Tonight I will make you a woman.'

Viola cocked her head. 'Are you sure you can make me a woman? Are you yourself yet a man?'

Emmanuel was transfixed. Otis coughed on cigar smoke, unable to tear his gaze away from the girl. Biting at the lip he'd chewed earlier, he waited fearfully to see what Emmanuel would do. He didn't like backchat from anyone, and this young woman was looking at Emmanuel as if he were the slave and she were the mistress.

Emmanuel stared at her, his expression alternating between delight and disdain.

The girl was unperturbed. Folding her arms across her chest, she said petulantly, 'Well? Are you going to keep me waiting all night?'

Caradoc closed the door behind him. Muffled by the thickness of the rich, warm mahogany, he listened, wishing he had the courage of his forebears who had hunted and fought their way from desert to coast on the continent of Africa.

'Are you a man or a mouse, you lazy, good fer nothin' black-assed . . .' he muttered to himself, then stopped suddenly as if something of the greatest importance had fallen on to his feet and pinned him to the spot. 'The old folks wouldna put up wiv this.'

Misty images of his ancestors flooded his mind and a terrible redness rose like dust before his eyes. He saw feet, many, many feet, tramping in time to a fast-beating drum. He saw shields, spears and felt the bloodlust of battle. Suddenly he was a warrior, just as his father had been, a man willing to fight and die – until he remembered how old he was.

'No, no, no!' He shook his head despondently, wrinkles rippling across his face then receding as he remembered other customs, other ways of vengeance.

He waited outside the room for his chance. It was two or three hours before all became quiet and Viola emerged.

He'd expected to see her upset as he had others. Instead, she frowned at him. 'What you doin' here?'

He looked her over and sniffed. 'You smells of them. Looks sweaty shiny too.'

'Might 'ave got more than their smell,' she said and patted her belly.

Caradoc was confused. Women were usually weeping after being called down to 'entertain' the white men. But Viola had a strange look in her eyes and seemed to welcome the fact that one of them

might have made her pregnant. Women were unpredictable. It was up to men to be proud.

He raised a finger to his mouth and stealthily, so very stealthily, crept into the room.

Puzzled and unabashed by her nudity, Viola followed and watched, as Caradoc bent over the eldest brother, and spat into his face.

'What you doin'?'

'Sshh,' he hissed. 'Old African way of showing contempt while the enemy's sleepin'. When he wakes, he'll see the smug look in my eyes. An' he won't know why he feels uneasy. He won't know that I insulted his spirit as he slept.'

'You don't need to do this for me. I can take care of meself,' Viola said.

'Shhh!' he said again and someone stirred.

Viola backed towards the door as Caradoc bent over Otis.

Placing each hand on the chair arms, he braced himself so his face was only inches from that of Otis.

Behind him, Jeb Strong blinked the bleariness from his eyes, saw a dark figure bending menacingly over his brother, and leapt to his feet. Before Caradoc could move, before anyone could explain, Jeb grabbed a silver candlestick and brought it crashing down on the butler's skull. Buckling from the waist, Caradoc slid down over Otis's legs and on to the floor.

'My God! He was going to kill me,' Otis screamed as he awoke. His eyes were wide with horror.

Blood spurted from the butler's head, trickling blackly into his collar and quickly staining the rich pile of the pale green carpet.

Viola shook her head, her accusing stare meeting the eyes of Jeb Strong. 'No, he weren't. He was spitting in yer face, insulting yer spirit while you slept. What else could an old man do?'

Jeb stared down at the dead butler and let the candlestick fall to the floor. 'Oh my God! He was going to kill you,' he mumbled as he took in the enormity of what he'd done. White-faced, he gazed at his brother in disbelief. 'He was going to kill you,' he repeated, felt sick and rushed to the window.

Otis staggered to his feet. Legs shaking under him, he wove his way across the room and shook his sleeping elder brother. 'Emmanuel! Jeb's killed Caradoc. Do something, Emmanuel. Do something, for God's sake!'

Emmanuel opened his eyes and started before the close proximity of his brother's face.

'And in our father's bedroom!' Otis proclaimed in a shocked, hushed voice.

Emmanuel hated being disturbed from sleep, and his face showed his displeasure. Expression unreadable, he got up from the bed, and pushed his brother aside.

With hardly a glance at the deceased, his gaze fixed on the naked Viola. 'Get back to where you belong,' he shouted angrily.

Otis pleaded. 'What shall we do?'

Emmanuel glared at Viola. 'Get rid of her. She's a witness.'

Wiping traces of bile from his mouth, Jeb shivered with fear, his face still as stone. 'What are you saying?' he asked without any trace of the usual sarcasm he reserved especially for his pompous brother.

Emmanuel looked at him sidelong. 'Sell her. Do anything.' He sprang to the door, laid himself against it, and fixed a cold look on the girl. 'Anything. We have to.'

'That's murder,' said Viola, her voice calm yet forceful.

Emmanuel tried to assess why she showed no fear. He'd been in card games with such people; Samson Strong had that same look when he was doing business. They all had one thing in common. Each of them had ulterior plans and had fixed their own agenda.

Jeb remained silent.

Otis was stunned, choosing to fix his gaze on Viola rather than on the dead man. Viola saw his interest, draped herself over the chair at his side and rested her chin on her hand.

'No need to sell me or do anythin' to my mind.' She shrugged a shoulder at the dead Caradoc. 'He tried to poke me on your papa's bed. You was passin' by and heard a helluva hootin' and hollerin' – me screamin' an' that. Ain't that fer the best?'

Emmanuel burst out laughing. 'Clever girl. Everyone knows black men are like animals when it comes to fornication.'

Swaying from side to side, as if she could hear a tune no one else could, she smiled as if she agreed, as if she had no intention of taking advantage of their own lust and the present situation.

Jeb, who up until now had seemed in a shocked stupor, wailed to high heaven as he slid to his knees and clasped his hands in prayer. 'Oh my God! Forgive me! Forgive me!'

Emmanuel frowned at the sight. 'For God's sake, pull yourself together.' He nodded at Otis. 'Get him to his feet. His behaviour unnerves me.'

Otis struggled with a wailing Jeb. Emmanuel's attention returned to Viola. 'For what price?' he asked in measured tones.

Viola thrust her pretty little chin that bit higher.

'I don't want to be a slave any more – I want to be a lady.'

Emmanuel glanced at his brothers. Jeb was still distraught, begging God's forgiveness and resisting Otis's attempts to get him off his knees, not that Otis was putting in much of an effort. His gaze kept sliding back to Viola. He still wanted her – badly.

Emmanuel smiled. 'Then a lady you shall be, my dear, though one slightly spoilt in the making.'

Sir Samson and Lady Strong arrived from England five days later, their arrival coinciding with the advent of Otis' twenty-first birthday. This was to be a one-off occasion, father and sons inspecting the cane fields, the threshing mills, the cooperage and transport to ship's hold. Following this, each son would be allocated his part in the family business. One son would go home with their parents with a view to reviewing the shipping side of the business. The other two would stay on the plantations and learn about growing sugar and the management of labour.

Tea was being served out on the veranda when the subject was aired. Sir Samson and Lady Strong had been told that Jeb had killed their butler to protect a maid.

'Obviously Jeb has to go back to Bristol,' muttered Sir Samson, his fine white hair fluttering like a cotton cloud around his gleaming pate. 'I had thought of leaving him here, but after this bit of nonsense . . .'

'Sugar?' asked his wife.

'Of course!' he snapped.

'I meant how many,' she said, her smile never faltering.

'Three, naturally!'

'Remember your gout, dear. The doctor said—'

'A quack! They're all quacks!'

At that precise moment a brightly coloured butterfly landed on his bandaged foot. Displeased by its presence, he swiped at it with his walking stick – and clipped his toe.

'Damn and bloody blast it!'

'Here's your tea, dear.'

'Damn the tea!'

Lady Amelia Strong rose from her chair, her smile undiminished. The pinkness of her cheeks matched the tiny rosebuds that patterned her dress of palest pistachio green. 'Business talk is one thing, my dearest. Blaspheming is another matter entirely.' With her head in the air and a swish of silk, she went into the house.

Otis's eyes strayed between father and elder brother. Jeb seemed not to notice her leaving. He was still thoughtful, staring at the

floor as if it were interesting. Emmanuel's gaze remained fixed on his father, the man he most admired.

Sir Samson nodded at his eldest son as if sensing and appreciating his admiration. 'Now she's gone, you can tell me more about this other matter.' He grinned broadly as he remembered younger times when he hadn't had gout and had picked his women with as much delight as a child choosing a sugar mouse. 'Sly old dog, that Caradoc. 'Pon my word, I never knew the man had it in him? 'Pon my word, indeed!' He chuckled salaciously. 'Was she pretty?'

Emmanuel looked to both his brothers, but each seemed preoccupied, one with guilt and one with thoughts of love. It was up to him to reply.

'She's very pretty.' He omitted her name, but went on to explain matters further, along the lines that Viola herself had suggested.

' 'Pon my word,' Sir Samson repeated, shaking his head, his fleshly jowls wobbling against his high collar. 'The sly old fox!'

'Yes, indeed, Father,' said Emmanuel, his palms damp with nerves. He almost sighed with relief that his father had believed the story so easily, but he should have known better. His relief was short-lived.

Sir Samson's walking stick connected with Emmanuel's shin. 'That's the truth for the law, my son. Now let's have the real truth for me!'

Gritting his teeth, Emmanuel considered assuring his father that he was telling the truth, then saw the flint-hard eyes, the iron jaw. So he told the truth and watched for his father's reaction.

At first his frown was like an overhang in a granite quarry, solid shadows over his eyes. But slowly his expression changed. Sir Samson began to laugh, his face running with sweat and bags of loose fat creasing into folds around his eyes. 'Stallions!' he exclaimed. 'Fiery young stallions, just like I was in my day.'

Reassured by his father's exuberance, Emmanuel relaxed and began to laugh with him. Otis too joined in. Only Jeb remained unmoved.

Sir Samson slapped the back of his eldest son, causing Emmanuel's heart to leap in his chest. He was surely favoured, the eldest son and heir to a fortune.

'Like father like son,' Sir Samson said. 'So, who was this midnight nymph that you took to my bed?'

Confidence renewed, Emmanuel almost shouted her name. 'Viola,' he said and laughingly added, 'She wants to be a lady – in exchange for her silence.'

'Does she now!' said Sir Samson, his voice laced with a mix of

sarcasm and cruelty. 'In exchange for her silence, she'll have the whip across her back – or I shall sell her, ship her off to the Carolinas where she can do no harm to this family. Lady indeed! There's no chance of that—'

'Detail, my dear Samson. Detail.' Lady Amelia, who had obviously been listening among the shadows of the house, swept back out on to the veranda and stood between her husband and his eldest son. 'As usual, my dear, you have no idea of the detail in this delicate little drama. You can't sell the girl, and neither can you have her whipped. You promised her father.'

'Eh?' Sir Samson looked nonplussed.

His wife's smile was undiminished as she towered over him. The fringes of her silk shawl fell like a waterfall from beneath her folded arms.

'Viola is Captain Desmond's daughter that he got on Magdalene. Her mother might be a slave, and so is Viola, but with stipulations. Captain Desmond is one of your best captains and you promised him you'd look after her properly. That means no whipping and no selling on.'

Sir Samson glared at his wife, then at his sons. 'But that means I have to adhere to the bargain that these young puppies made with her,' he exclaimed in amazement.

Lady Amelia's lips parted in an amused smile. 'My, my. A moment ago your sons were stallions. Now they've become puppies.' She pushed past Emmanuel and fondled the head of her youngest son. For the first time that day, she turned a smile-free face on her husband. 'Either that, my dear husband, or one of our young stallions could end up on the gallows.'

Emmanuel sprang to his feet. 'They couldn't hang him. He could say it was self-defence. He thought Caradoc was attacking Otis.'

Lady Samson looked at him coldly. 'You may be willing to take a chance on that. As his mother, I will not allow it.' Jeb remained as silently withdrawn as he had done since that evening. His mother nestled his head beneath her breasts, her fingers running through his hair. She looked down at him. 'Prison would be bad enough, but look at him. He's riddled with guilt. He'll tell them he did it in cold blood purely to save his soul.'

For a while, time seemed suspended in silence. Only the sound of insects and the crying of seabirds disturbed the warm evening. It was Otis who finally spoke.

'She's a lovely looking young woman,' he said and surprised everyone. It wasn't like him to express his feelings, especially in front of his parents. 'I think I could be fond of her,' he said.

Lady Samson raised her eyebrows and looked from her son to her husband. 'I take it that this is the time when respectable women should leave the room.'

No one responded.

'I see,' she said and, for the second time that day, she left them to cogitate.

The men guarded their conversation until sure they were alone. Sir Samson looked to Otis. 'I trust we're talking about setting her up apart from the family, not moving the wench into the house?'

'Well . . .' Otis began in his usual nervous fashion.

'He does,' said Emmanuel.

Otis shot him a grateful smile.

Sir Samson turned his attention to his youngest son and frowned. His other sons had come through this easily enough, although of course they were not the perpetrators of the killing. That responsibility lay on Jeb's shoulders.

He said, 'Under the circumstances, it's best that Otis stays here in Barbados as manager of the estate.' He smiled. 'In time we'll get him a wife, but no doubt he will not be lonely.'

Otis smiled warmly and Emmanuel laughed.

With the help of his stick, Sir Samson struggled to his feet. 'Back to England for both of us,' he said to Emmanuel, and looked pleased at the prospect. Turning to Jeb, he said, 'I had planned for both you and Otis to stay here. I now think it's best that you accompany your brother and me back to England. There's the shipping side of the business—'

'The clergy!'

Jeb had hardly spoken for days so the sound and sharpness of his voice took them all by surprise. 'I've decided to join the clergy,' he repeated.

His father looked fit to burst. 'Nonsense!'

Emmanuel was astounded. 'You're mad!'

Jeb shook his head. 'I have to do penance for my sin. It's only right.'

'Right? Right?' Sir Samson began to splutter, his face reddening as he fought for breath. Finally, he got his coughing under control. Pointing his quivering stick at his youngest son, he said, 'You'll regret it, my son. You have all this!'

Jeb ran his eyes over the rich green fields, the toiling slaves, and the sea beyond. Behind him was the stunning opulence of Rivermead House, though its construction and furnishings were nothing when compared to Marstone Court.

'I've been walking and thinking a lot just lately. I walked down

to the harbour and I saw children around the Bridgetown docks, starving they were and dressed in rags. There's sugar growing all around, but not for the likes of them. I want to do something about it.'

Sir Samson guffawed as though it were the funniest joke in the world. 'Well, you can't. You're going back to Bristol. That'll scupper that little plan, my son!'

Jeb shrugged, his expression completely calm. 'Barbados or Bristol. It makes no difference. There are street urchins in every city.'

Sir Samson scowled. 'You'll regret it, my boy! Mark my words.'

Unseen by her husband, Lady Strong watched from the shadows beyond the doorway. She smiled and there was a look of pride on her face. Jeb saw her, and knew his mother understood. He'd been born into wealth and administered to since birth. In recompense for what he had done, he would administer to the disadvantaged for the rest of his days.

'You're a fool,' muttered Emmanuel.

'And you're the eldest son,' Jeb said with a smile. 'You have to follow in our father's footsteps, but I can do as I please.'

Their father interrupted. 'Manny,' he said, his face shining with the pride of a man who knows his son is exactly as he wants him to be, a perfect copy of himself, 'not going to disappoint me and join a monastery, are you?' He laughed loudly.

Emmanuel clicked his fingers at the new butler, whose hands shook as he filled four glasses to the brim with dark, Barbadian rum. 'No, Father.' He raised his glass. 'I promise to follow in your footsteps – only I shall take bigger strides!'

Father and son laughed together.

Hating to be left out, Otis laughed too, pleased to remain in Barbados with sole responsibility for the plantation, and to be regarded enough of a man to take a mistress.

Only Jeb remained silent, his eyes locking in mute understanding with those of his mother. Perhaps she knew that he woke in a sweat in the middle of the night, unable to move and crying for something lost. The slaves believed that dreams were portents of things to come. He hoped they were wrong and that retribution would not fall on his or the heads of those he loved.