

## **Granite Island**

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## Chapter 1

### *Autumn 1934:*

The old building shook as if the wharf beneath might fall apart at any second, and dump it into the heaving waters of the harbor. Crouching on his bed, in a little room under the eaves, six-year-old Jamie listened to the storm and wept-but not from fear.

Not fear of the weather or of the maddened ocean, anyway. His wiry little body ached with fast-developing bruises, and his skinned back burned from his uncle's belt.

*I won't let him do that to me again. He hates me, and it's not my fault! I didn't do anything that bad...did I?*

The boy scrubbed at his eyes with a shirt sleeve, because he hadn't done as Uncle Robert ordered him and undressed as soon as the man pushed him in here and went away. He could see nothing, in this room where he wasn't trusted with candle or oil lamp; where Aunt Louisa usually left him a light that would last just long enough so he could get ready and crawl into bed. On an ordinary night there would be a lantern burning at the wharf's end, and the moon might be shining. But tonight all was black, so that if he hadn't known the rooms over "the shop" (as local folk called his uncle's place of business) intimately he wouldn't have dared to venture out. But he didn't need to see the narrow corridors, or the steep staircases, to make his way down from his nook beneath the steeply pitched roof.

They were all asleep now, of course. Uncle Robert and Aunt Louisa in their bedroom, and his cousins-six of them, three boys and three girls-in their

two rooms. Sometimes his oldest boy cousin, Sammy, taunted small James about his separate quarters: “You’re so special, you get to have your own room! What makes you so special, anyway, besides being a little bastard?” But no one had to explain to Jamie that living under the roof wasn’t a privilege. It was cold there in winter, hot in summer, airless all the year round-and most of all, it was lonesome. Isolating him not as a mark of favor, but to keep the tainted child safely away from those born in proper wedlock.

This wasn’t the first time he’d slipped out at night. Young though he was, James Stinnett Court had roamed this Maine waterfront alone so many times that doing it while all was still and silent (from 9 p.m., when all decent folk on Granite Island went to bed, until between 3 and 4 a.m. when fishermen’s houses started showing lamplight at their windows) only seemed like a pleasant adventure. On quieter nights, at least, it had seemed that way...but when the shop’s door tore itself out of his small hands and started opening and shutting in time with the wind, he thought for a paralyzed moment about dashing back inside and regaining his attic refuge before anyone could hear and come to investigate.

No. Even if Uncle Robert didn’t catch him (and his cousins probably were awake by now, since the door’s fearful banging could surely be heard above the wind and surf!), Jamie would still get blamed for this. And then his uncle would beat him, again...he couldn’t take more right now. And he wasn’t going to, either!

He left the door swinging on its hinges, crashing back and forth and letting sheets of rain drench the shop’s interior, and he ran. Across the packed dirt at the wharf’s head, where customers parked their vehicles. Not up the road that ascended a steep hill as it left the waterfront, but into the woods beside it. Onto the path that the Stinnett children, legitimate offspring of Robert and Louisa as well as their bastard cousin James, used to make their way toward school each morning, until the winter’s ice and snow forced them to take the longer way of the road instead.

Where was he going tonight? Surely not to the schoolhouse, although he ought to be there tomorrow morning. For a moment James let himself picture it, how his teacher would react if she came to work (long before any of her students showed up, as was her habit) and found him sitting on the doorstep in his present condition. His shirt bloody and untucked, just as he’d shrugged it on after Uncle Robert made him take his shirt off and his pants down for the whipping. His clothing soaked, his hair sodden, his shoes muddy and caked with wet autumn leaves.

Sitting on the doorstep? No. He wasn’t going to want to sit anywhere for awhile, including on the unforgiving seat of his half of one of the schoolhouse’s

double desks, even though he normally loved escaping there from “home.”

He shared that desk with his cousin Cecily, who wasn’t one of Uncle Robert’s brood. She belonged to Uncle Jay and Aunt Caroline, who lived in the big white house through whose yard Jamie had to walk when he followed this path to school. Cecily was Jamie’s own age, and she had no siblings. Aunt Caroline, he’d heard Aunt Louisa telling other women (now that the shop had a telephone, which Aunt Louisa used for hours each afternoon on what definitely wasn’t business), could “breed but not carry.”

Aunt Caroline was beautiful, and she and Cecily lived alone in that big house most of the time because Uncle Jay was a shipmaster. A stern man considerably Uncle Robert’s junior in age, as tall and tough and handsome as Uncle Robert was short and round and homely. Uncle Robert only scared Jamie when he was angry, because then his temper turned him into the wielder of a rivet-studded belt. Uncle Jay, on the other hand, scared Jamie all the time. He was so big, and his voice was so loud! And he handled his womenfolk so, well...not roughly, exactly. But Jamie shivered every time he thought about watching Uncle Jay sweep first Aunt Caroline (a tiny woman, whose clipped British accent made Aunt Louisa scorn her almost as much as did her inability to produce live babies) and then little Cecily clear of the ground when he hugged them.

Uncle Robert didn’t hug anybody, except perhaps Aunt Louisa in private, and Aunt Louisa only hugged her own children. Never her dead sister-in-law’s bastard, James. She took proper care of him, kept him sheltered and clothed and fed, but he couldn’t remember a time when he’d sat on her lap the way his nearest-age cousin still did. Not that he wanted to at six, of course! But it seemed strange that he couldn’t remember doing it when he was younger...in church, on Sunday nights or at prayer-meeting, Cecily always wound up in either her mother’s or her father’s lap. To fall asleep there, and be carried home, although she was getting so big now that she hardly fit into Aunt Caroline’s arms.

James thought about all those things as he climbed the path up Stinnett’s Hill, slipping in the mud and falling several times before he reached the place where the trees ended. Below the edge of Aunt Caroline’s lawn, which looked almost like that of a summer estate...the boy scrambled up the remaining yards of pathway, between granite boulders and over ledges that poked above the thin soil (ledges slippery with wet moss, and soil thick with low-bush blueberry plants that in daylight would be ruddy from fall’s first frosts).

The wind still howled and battered at him, but the rain had stopped now. The clouds were blowing away, literally, and from behind them came the moon. Full and brilliant, the remnants of the storm-clouds scudding across its face, as

the stars (billions of them, just as “countless” as the Bible said!) also reappeared.

Did anyone know he was gone yet? Would anyone come looking for him? And did it matter, since he wasn’t planning to be found?

Or maybe he was, and just didn’t want to admit it, because why else had he come here? James walked across the lawn (which, although well tended and still green even this late in the year, was nowhere near as wastefully broad as that of most summer places). He stood by the steps, the ones that led to a sea-ward facing front door since all good Maine coastal homes turned their backs on the land, and he wondered what to do next.

He could see no lights inside, but that only meant the front rooms were unoccupied. Not that no one was awake. What time was it by now? So late, surely, that only in a house where there was turmoil-death, or sickness, or impending birth-would a decent Granite Islander be anywhere except in bed.

“Jamie!”

The deep voice caught him unaware, and so did the footsteps on the wet turf behind him. As did the hands that seized him, painfully because even his arms were bruised from tonight’s unusually vigorous beating, and lifted him aloft.

“Ouch!” he said, too startled to attempt his usual stoicism.

“What’s the matter? Did you hurt yourself? You look like you’ve fallen down,” his younger uncle’s voice said, and for all its sea-trained power it didn’t sound fearsome at all right now. Just worried, and oddly gentle. “Don’t worry, I’ll take you home. But let’s wait for morning now, all right?”

*I don’t want to go home!* James didn’t utter the words, but only because he managed to swallow them before they escaped. All his wakefulness, all the frenetic energy that had borne him along during the climb from the harbor, deserted him now. Like the six-year-old he was, he wrapped his small arms around the neck of the big man who held him; and he buried his face against his uncle’s shoulder. And after a moment, after the strong arms closed around him warmly, he couldn’t stop himself from crying at last.

\* \* \*

“If I’d known about this before...” Joshua John Stinnett spoke softly to his wife, because the two children in the huge bed were just settling into sleep. His daughter, Cecily, back into slumber after waking briefly; and his nephew, James, from exhaustion. “Do you think we need to get the doctor for him, Caroline?”

“No. It’s better to keep these things in the family, dearest.” The small, lovely, brown-haired woman he’d married on a whim ten years earlier, a whim

that this ordinarily deliberate and pragmatic man had never for one moment regretted, pursed her lips. “He’s bruised, and his back’s a mess; but I’ve done everything the doctor would do, or could do, already. I only wish I could think this was the first time that ever happened to him! But it wasn’t. You saw the scars, as well as I did.”

“Yes.” Jay, as Joshua John Stinnett was always called by those to whom he wasn’t simply “Cap’n” or “Skipper,” tightened his arm around his love. They’d stripped the little boy together, and bathed him in front of the big, warm kitchen range, with lamplight in plenty because Caroline liked to see what she was doing and they could afford the fuel. Tight-fisted as he could be in business, with his wife and his daughter Jay could never bear to be anything except generous.

Oh, he’d wanted this so much when he was Jamie’s age! A safe, comfortable place to live, instead of that wretched “shop” down on the wharf (which his father ran before his older brother took over). A woman to touch him gently and with love, a full belly, and the certainty of waking in the morning to peace. Instead of to his widowed, embittered, and always impoverished (despite what should have been a lucrative business) father’s jibes...*dear God*.

Where he’d spent his own hellish childhood, he had put his small nephew without a thought. Although today’s players were different, of course. Robert wasn’t Papa, Louisa wasn’t Mama, and their six kids plus Jamie didn’t make a family equivalent to Robert, Jay, and Marianne Stinnett of long ago. Nineteen, fourteen, and five years old, respectively, when their mother died trying to birth a stillborn fourth child...*why didn’t I even think about bringing Marianne’s baby home for Caroline and me to raise?*

“I wish I’d been well when he was born, but I was so sick after I had Cecily. And she was still so tiny, not even a month old, when Marianne had Jamie.” Caroline, as she so often did, seemed to be reading her husband’s thoughts. “But if I’d known that expecting Louisa and Robert to take him would lead to this! Jay, we aren’t letting him go back there to live. Ever. Are we, now?”

Another thing about Caroline was that here, in this home, she was the boss. And she knew it, too. Instead of being annoyed, Captain Stinnett smiled at the confidence in his petite wife’s voice. He answered in the gentle tone that other adults never heard from him, “Of course not, sweetheart. From this night on, he’s ours.”

\* \* \*

Nestling into the soft bed, and gaining warmth from both its covers and his cousin’s sleepy body, James Stinnett Court heard his uncle’s words and hoped



with all his soul that he was still awake. He didn't think he could stand it, if all this turned out to be a dream.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 2

*November 1946:*

The bridge heaved whenever the wind blew, because it had a mile-wide channel to span and its pillars (anchored deep beneath that channel's frigid waters) were still settling, even ten years after it carried its first traffic. James Stinnett Court, eighteen years old, grinned as he felt the roadway moving under the car's tires. "Feels like walking a deck, doesn't it, Uncle Jay?" he asked the man who occupied the passenger seat. "Too bad you've got such a long trip, though. Do you ever wish you'd been able to hang onto Uncle Robert and the shop?"

Driving felt good to Jamie right now, because he'd done none since reporting for his first term at the Maine Maritime Academy that summer. He'd met Uncle Jay in Ellensport, after a bus ride from Castine that actually took him past the turn for Granite Island-but Ellensport was where Jay Stinnett kept his car during the week. From there Jamie's uncle took the train to and from his office in Portland, where he managed the freighters their family owned.

A growing fleet of them, now. Not just the two, one of which he captained himself, that the Stinnett brothers possessed on the day they parted company twelve years earlier. Jay mortgaged everything he and his wife owned, then, to buy out Robert's share in both ships, because his brother claimed all the funds realized from selling their father's waterfront business. Jay had his nephew's percentage under his control, since small James was his sister Marianne's only heir and she'd named him (not Robert) her executor, and that made keeping the freighters possible. Just barely...but he defied the Great Depression itself and

did it, with the same determination he'd used in past years to get those ships bought in the first place. After which he proved that he no longer needed Robert's capital to keep "Stinnett Steamships" afloat, financially speaking. And that was lucky, because after Jamie's first night in Aunt Caroline's care his two uncles could no longer communicate without shouting at each other.

James the young man shuddered and pushed the memories aside, whenever thoughts of his first six years tried to surface. The only part of all that which he wanted to recall was knowing, because on one of his first days in her home Aunt Caroline took him onto her lap (already an awkward business for that tiny woman!) and told him so in the bluntest possible words, that it wasn't his fault his uncles were fighting. "Robert's a grown man, and he should have known better than take his anger out on a child," she'd said, pursing her lips as she did only when she was quietly furious. "Jamie, darling, we didn't know! Your Uncle Jay and I. But we should have, and now we're trying to make things right. That's all that's happening, and I want you to believe it no matter what else you may hear people say."

Aunt Caroline's graying head didn't come up to his shoulder, now. But then her arms had felt wonderfully strong and protective, and he'd rested his cheek against her breast for a time before he let her dry his tears and slide him gently onto his feet.

"That was a lucky thing for us, you know," Jay Stinnett remarked to his nephew now, ignoring James's comment about the mobile bridge deck and responding instead to the younger man's question. "If I hadn't had a reason to cut Robert loose, I probably never would have. So not only would you have spent the rest of your childhood in his house, but we'd never have come as far as we have with the business."

James didn't answer. He felt his fair skin flushing, though; and he said after a moment, gruffly in his new baritone, "I'll bet Aunt Caroline wishes you'd been able to keep the office on the Island. She was looking forward to when you wouldn't have to go to sea anymore, but just down over the hill to a desk at Uncle Robert's place."

"I know she was. But I couldn't run things from the Island even if I did still have the old shop to work out of. Everything's just too complicated, especially now that the war's over and we're trying to keep the business growing in peacetime, Jamie." Jay stared for a moment, satisfying himself that although he'd heard no direct reply the boy had heard the message he'd tried to convey. He was just as happy, of course, that Jamie hadn't offered maudlin words of gratitude-because the youngster didn't owe him that. If anything, Jay and Caroline still owed the kid a huge apology for his life's first six hellish years! The last thing in the world Jamie ought to feel about any of the changes

caused by his move, from Robert's and Louisa's care into that of Jay and Caroline, was guilt. Even if the breakup of the business partnership between the Stinnett brothers hadn't turned out, however unexpectedly, as such a tremendous blessing.

"When's CeeCee coming home?" James wanted to know, as the car left the toll bridge's surface and started along the narrow road.

"Tomorrow. Early train, and she's got a ride as far as the mainland end of the bridge. If you'd like, and if you don't mind waiting in the cold, you can collect her for me." Aunt Caroline didn't drive, which was why Uncle Jay kept this car parked in Ellensport between trips to and from Portland.

"Sure!" Another chance to take the car out? This time, by himself? Jamie grinned, and felt glad he'd earned his license.

He would have two days at home, not counting this one or the day when he must leave. That wasn't long, after being holed up on the Academy's campus in Castine since starting his studies there; but it should be time enough to hear first-hand everything that his cousin had already written to him about her first semester at Pilgrim College. Plus all the things that Cecily hadn't written, of course, since the house mother could read her charges' mail (both outgoing, and incoming).

Oh, he'd missed CeeCee. They'd been reared together from the age of six, and sharing a blanket with her during their toddler days was one of his first memories, but she wasn't a sister to him. He knew that now more than ever, after being parted from her-for real, not just for a job "yachting" as part of a summer complaint's crew-for the first time.

\* \* \*

Cecily Anne Stinnett couldn't wait to escape from the back seat of the car that her roommates' father was driving. She'd spent far too many hours on the train from New Hampshire, all the way from Pilgrim Bible College in the White Mountains to Ellensport on the Maine mid-coast, and she'd barely slept during that journey. And now, she had to endure sliding along rural roads on a morning when the temperature had yet to reach as high as zero!

Three girls and their luggage had the car's interior space (that which its bemused-looking male driver didn't occupy) and its trunk stuffed full, and Cecily's traveling companions hadn't stopped talking since Ellensport. She disliked female chatter at the best of times-which this definitely wasn't.

Her roommates Ethel and Sandra were twins, and their home town was Castine. Where Jamie had spent the past few months, on a dignified brick campus that made Pilgrim College's hastily constructed buildings look like

shipyard housing by comparison...but the Maritime Academy was no place for a young woman. So envying her cousin his more interesting curriculum and better accommodations would get her nowhere. She might as well be thankful that Papa was willing to educate her beyond high school at all, instead of wishing she might train to be something (*anything*) but an elementary schoolteacher.

*Maybe when I'm an upperclassman, I can take Greek or Hebrew as an elective. If I do well enough in my regular Bible courses, the ones everybody at Pilgrim's got to take anyway, maybe they'll let me do that even though I'm not going to be a minister. I'd be the only girl in the room, but I've never minded that. And once I've shown the professor I can do the work just as well as any boy, I'll bet he won't mind, either.*

She'd done that in an advanced mathematics course in high school, one the Island's little "academy" offered because its young men still needed to understand navigation even though the time when they routinely became blue water sailors was past now. Fishermen couldn't always stay near shore, so the training they required to find their way while out of sight of land didn't seem like a waste to the school's trustees-and Cecily had heard her mother, who sat on that board, remark with satisfaction that the percentage of boys remaining in school long enough to graduate went up considerably after the class was added.

They'd gotten used to having a girl in the room, and competing with them, after a week or two. And since she was both Captain Stinnett's daughter, and her classmate Jamie's cousin, they never had dared to complain about her presence openly; or to make her life difficult, by any means except silent disapproval.

"Cecily! We're there!" Ethel and Sandra's father penetrated her dreamy doze with his deep voice. She realized that the car had stopped moving, and that the door beside her seat stood open. Frigid, sea-wet air slapped against her face, and made her gather her winter coat around her body and fasten it quickly. The car's rear seat wasn't warm enough for her to have removed that coat at any time during the ride from Ellensport (at least an hour's journey in perfect summer weather, and a lot longer on a day like this one).

"CeeCee?" asked a more familiar voice, not quite as deep but decidedly masculine. Only one person in the world could call her that and get away with it, because it was his own babyhood mispronunciation of her name.

"Jamie!" She vaulted out of the car, then. She threw her arms around him, and buried her face against his wool-clad chest.

His arms felt stronger, and his upper body thicker, than the last time she'd done this. Although she was tall for a woman (towering, compared to her petite mother!), she still had to lift her face toward his when she stepped back from that welcoming embrace. He'd grown. Again.

"Come on. Car's running." He hugged her close again for a moment, and

then let her go. "Thanks, Mr. Simmons."

They threw her bags from one car's trunk to the other, and Cecily settled into the passenger side up front. She'd passed her test on the same day James had, and she was itching to drive after being stuck where she never got the chance; but anyone knew that when a man and a woman rode together, the man should drive. She smiled when she realized why the toll taker stared sourly at them as her cousin handed over a prepaid ticket.

Of course. People didn't usually drive off the Island, pick someone up on the mainland side of the bridge, and then drive back on; that wasted a precious round trip toll. Nor did they, in these times, leave a car's engine running while they waited for someone to show up. But Jamie was just as bad as Papa was about spoiling her...for themselves they wouldn't have done that, either one of them.

The snow started as they reached the top of the bridge, which spanned the channel in an upswept arch so that even a tall-masted yacht might pass beneath without the need for a draw to open. She felt the roadway beneath the car's wheels shuddering as the wind picked up, and she smiled again.

"Damn," James muttered, daringly for a church-going Island boy. "I've got the chains in the trunk, but I was hoping we could get all the way home without 'em."

"Did you and Papa need them yesterday, to get home from the station?" She had so much to tell him, but right now none of it would reach her lips. They might not have time alone together to speak of, again, during the scant couple of days they'd both be at home-and here they were, talking inanities. As if they really were sister and brother, or (worse, and more accurately) a couple so long wed that they had nothing left to say to each other.

"No. Did Mr. Simmons need them this morning?"

Of course. She'd just made the same trip, exactly, in a vehicle of similar weight and design. Cecily blushed. "No. He didn't," she said, and then she stayed silent and watched the snowflakes hitting the windshield.

Clearly it had been cold here, too, during the first part of November. In the White Mountains, "hills" to many of Pilgrim College's students but "mountains" to Cecily Stinnett from Maine, she'd been wading through half a foot of snow two mornings ago in order to get from the dormitory to the dining hall and breakfast. But she knew, from what the upperclassmen told her, that a mountain winter could be counted on to come early, stay late, and turn in a command performance. She'd hoped things at home might be just a bit milder.

But, no. The war years' brutal weather pattern was holding, obviously, because everywhere she looked she saw either salt water ice rimming the shore line or snow already starting to pile up along the roadside. The spruces and firs

stood out against that backdrop, and with more snow falling there was nothing to relieve the land and seascapes' starkness. From the bridge she'd glimpsed water that was dark gray rather than summertime blue, and she'd felt thankful that Papa no longer took ships out there.

She wished James were going to school anywhere else in the world except a maritime academy, because before long he'd be out there again himself. But not, from now on, as a deck hand on a yacht-sailing in summer only, and making for safe harbor (as pleasure craft could do at the owner's will) whenever seriously bad weather threatened. But at least he hadn't reached fighting age while the war was still on!

"I missed you," she said at last, when she realized that half an hour had passed and they'd traveled almost from one end of Granite Island to the other. From the landward side, with its bridge, to the side that faced the sea; where the house they both called home stood on its hilltop, and overlooked a harbor that during the last century had played host to ships from all over the world.

In summer it was still an active port, but now its business came from lobster boats and summer sloops and schooners. The last of the great "coasters," cargo vessels built in defiance of the inevitable shift away from sail, had foundered in Wiscasset years ago-or had been dismantled, and given ignominious new lives as barges. None of which affected her father's business, except that he couldn't live at home full time even though he no longer went to sea because a modern shipping line couldn't be run from Granite Island.

"Missed you, too," James answered at last, after a pause that had Cecily wondering what in the world she could say next if he didn't answer her at all. "I could sure use you in some of my classes, CeeCee! Nobody else I know is as quick as you are at all the subjects I have trouble with."

"Thanks. I think." She didn't try to keep the hurt out of her voice. Although she didn't weep easily, she had to blink fiercely to keep tears from coming. "Jamie, we're almost home! I don't want to talk about school, or the weather. We can talk about things like that with Mama and Papa around. I want to talk about us!"

He sighed. His big hands tightened on the steering wheel, and not (she thought) just because the driving was getting trickier as he turned the car off the only blacktop road the Island had, and onto the dirt lane that led past the schoolhouse and ended near the Stinnetts' back door. After a moment he said, "CeeCee, if we do much of that we'll drive each other crazy. Won't we? With almost three years to go, before you're through at Pilgrim and I'm done at the Academy? And even after that, we'll probably have to wait awhile before we can get married. If the folks don't have a fit when they find out that's what we're going to do...it's not against the law in Maine, but some people think it's

wrong just the same. For first cousins to marry, I mean.”

“Oh, pshaw.” Cecily sometimes used her mother’s favorite pseudo curse, and whenever it slipped out she felt annoyed with herself afterward. “It’s always happened, Jamie. In half the books I read, the older people are pushing the young ones together to keep a business or an inherited fortune in the family! But here we are, trying to keep our family from finding out how we really feel about each other. That sounds pretty dumb, doesn’t it?”

“No. It sounds to me like if they thought we belonged together, they’d have let us know it by now. But anyway, hon,” and now James blushed like the eighteen-year-old he still was, “it’ll be a long time before we can do anything about how we feel. So let’s not say anything we’ll be sorry about saying later, okay?”

“Okay. I guess.” Once again, Cecily found herself on the verge of hated tears. She bit her lower lip, holding it between her teeth like a child...until, just after the car stopped in snow so thick that she couldn’t have made the house out clearly even if her eyes hadn’t been swimming in unwanted moisture, she felt a hand on her shoulder.

“Hey. How’m I supposed to kiss you, if you’re going to do that?” He sounded amused, and contrite, and still-of course-boyishly embarrassed. But when she turned toward him, blindly, and held up a willing mouth, he found it with his and he didn’t touch her awkwardly at all.

They’d done this before. But never, she thought as they drew apart a few dizzying moments later, with such a risk of being caught-because over the storm, and through the car’s closed windows, she could already hear her father’s mariner-trained voice bellowing her name in welcome.

Jamie was right. They’d better be careful, because (she realized as her heart, already pounding from the kiss’s excitement, started hammering even harder when she’d barely left her cousin’s arms before the passenger door flew open!) she was no more ready than he was to take their plans and lay them out before her parents. Even though she hoped with all her soul that someday when they did so at last, it would be just like one of those romantic English novels from the local library or from her mother’s bookshelf; in which the cousins married both to keep the family’s property intact, and for love’s sake, too. She hoped Jay and Caroline wouldn’t rise up in horror, as James had just suggested they might, and tell her that what she and her would-be lover wanted was wrong.

Because it wasn’t wrong. It couldn’t be. And even if it was, she didn’t give a...*damn!*

\* \* \*



### Chapter 3

*The phone rang during dinner, of course. (“Dinner,” in any Granite Island household, was the meal served at noon-or, in some households, an hour or so before that.)* Caroline answered, and came back to the table afterward with a worried look on her face. “Jay, I need to get to the old Cayford place,” she announced. “That girl who’s moved in with Len Cayford is getting ready to have her baby, and there’s no way anyone’s going to try to take her all the way to Ellensport today.”

The nearest hospital was in the same mainland town as the train and bus stations, and with the storm worsening hourly only a fool would have started for anywhere off-island now. Jay Stinnett said calmly to his wife, “Then I’ll take you, dear. But let’s finish eating first, all right? And let’s take whatever’s left over with us. I’ve got a notion there’s not a lot of food in that house.”

That made sense. It wasn’t far to the old Cayford place, but once they got there they’d be staying until the storm blew itself out. Caroline said, “You finish. I’m going to start packing some things.”

Cecily asked, “Why aren’t they calling Dr. Schofield, Mama?”

“He’s at the hospital with another patient,” Caroline answered, and then sighed. “And since we’ve only got one doctor left on the Island now, that’s that! But everything will be all right, love. I’ve had to help bring babies before, and besides that,” the small woman’s blue eyes warmed with mischief, “I’ve had a little bit of experience at having them myself.”

Cecily felt herself blushing, and looked down at her plate. Quickly. Across the table, she glimpsed Jamie doing the same. Neither wanted to be reminded

that Jay and Caroline had surely brought Cecily into being by normal human methods.

Caroline didn't miss her daughter's and foster son's embarrassment, but it only made her smile broadly in her husband's direction. She'd celebrated her forty-second birthday a month ago. It was still entirely possible for her to conceive for the fourth time, if by some miracle they finished their mercy-errand and got back here to their bedroom so she could lie in his arms tonight. How would Cecily and James react, if that should happen?

She couldn't really hope for it, though. Not after the misery she'd suffered in losing a son at five months' gestation, before she had Cecily; and not after she'd nearly died in losing another boy (this one at six months), three years after her daughter's birth. She hadn't conceived since, and that was fine with her. And more than fine, she knew, with her husband; who from their earliest days together hadn't been one of those men who wanted children so much that he could ignore what bearing them might cost his wife.

Soon she had the food she would take with them packed into a basket, and other items she knew she would need into a satchel. She wrapped herself in her heaviest coat, pulled on overshoes, tucked a muffler around her head and throat. Would she ever get used to the winters here?

No. Not when after more than twenty years on Granite Island, she still thought of that season in terms of her girlhood in southern England. Every storm from off the wild Western Ocean surprised her, although she certainly had long ago lost the right to feel that way.

At least she wouldn't have to send her husband out into the snow again, as soon as he'd conveyed her to their neighbors' house. This time she needn't worry about who would keep the fires burning, and tend to her own baby, while she was gone; because her "baby" was old enough, now, so that before long Cecily would surely have a family of her own.

\* \* \*

"I'll help," James said, when Cecily began gathering up the dishes and carrying them toward the long sink with its hand-operated water pump. They'd come so close to getting an electric cable laid, on the sea bed across the channel to the mainland, before the war's beginning took priority-and it ought to be happening soon, perhaps as early as next summer, now that the conflict was over at last. In the meantime each of the young people had grown accustomed to living in places where you flipped a switch to turn on the lights, instead of putting a match to a wick. Where you turned a tap, and water flowed out (hot or cold water, at that). But this was still home, and James still felt glad to be here. After

all, it wasn't that much trouble to use the pump-handle to add enough cold water to the dishpan so that the steaming water from the wood range's enormous (and perpetually boiling) teakettle wouldn't scald Cecily's hands. Tonight, if the folks didn't get home (and it sure looked as if they wouldn't), he'd have to remember to drain that pump before letting the fires in both kitchen stove and wood furnace burn low. And then, come morning, whoever got down here first from the freezing bedrooms would have to prime it before the pump could once again bring water from the spring.

"Thanks," his cousin said, with what for her was unusual shyness. She started washing without another word, and James picked up one of Aunt Caroline's fresh dishtowels and started to dry.

His hands shook when he reached past Cecily to put a tumbler on a high shelf, as he'd done so many other times when they'd shared this household task. Being "Captain Stinnett's children" hadn't excused them from learning how to work without complaining; if anything, it meant that they'd learned how sooner! When his chest brushed against her shoulder and she reacted by leaning back against him, he dropped the tumbler.

It was a stout piece of everyday glassware, but it couldn't take being dropped from that height onto a hard kitchen floor. It shattered, noisily.

James dropped to his knees, and reached automatically to gather up the shards when any damn fool would have known enough to get the broom and dust pan and do the job that way. Cecily, wearing an everyday winter dress, started to do the same thing just as mindlessly. "Don't!" he rasped at her, as he felt glass stabbing at the tough skin of one of his thumbs and thought in horror of what it could do to a woman's stocking-clad knees.

"Jamie, you're bleeding. Let me see." She reached for his hands, making him drop the bits of glass he was holding. When she straightened up from her half-crouch, she drew him with her.

And then, somehow, she was in his arms. Not in an embrace of greeting, that anyone might see them share; and not in a furtive, hasty touch in a car's front seat, or (as on the summer evening when they'd said their good-byes before their first real separation) among sheltering trees on the old school-to-shore pathway below the house. This time they really were by themselves, and in a place where they could hold each other as long as they wanted to without breaking apart. And already the afternoon was growing dim, on this stormy day at a time of year when all the days grew steadily shorter.

"Not here!" Cecily gasped, after he'd kissed her thoroughly and she had kissed him back. She took his hand, its slight bleeding stopped already (and for the moment forgotten), and drew him away from the sink.

Out of the kitchen, too, as if that were too public a room for what he now

realized they were about to do. By unspoken mutual agreement, even though they both knew the Bible made it plain this kind of loving was only for after you got married...but James didn't want to think about the Bible right now.

Or, especially, about how his mother had done this with a man who wasn't her husband (no doubt at all about that, since Dennis Court was nowhere near Granite Island when his wife conceived James). Everyone except Uncle Jay and Aunt Caroline said his birth killed her because she'd made him in sin. Was *this* why, when a woman like Marianne Stinnett Court surely knew what risks adultery carried? James had always wondered; and now, at last, he thought he understood.

Pulling back from these feelings didn't seem possible. In the bedroom just off the kitchen, where sick people and tiny babies and household guests got to sleep but healthy family members never did, they sank down together on the quilt. There they kissed some more, and James ran his hands over the slim body beneath him-especially over its rounded places. After which his breath was coming so quickly that he felt light-headed, and he wanted with sudden urgency to uncover that intriguing body's hidden crevices.

Would she start fighting him if he did that; if he started to undress her? If so, he'd have to stop no matter how difficult it seemed. But she didn't protest when he lifted her dress, or when he drew her underwear down, either.

The room was cold, but by now he wasn't feeling it because his body was generating plenty of heat of its own. He fumbled his trousers open, and then felt for the opening he knew he should find between his love's parted legs.

She cried out when he pushed the excited part of him inside her, and she arched her back. He felt resistance from her flesh, he must surely be hurting her. But if so, why was she responding with what could only be welcome? Lifting herself to meet him, not just the first time-but over and over, with every thrust?

She liked it. She must like it, or she'd be struggling to get him off her. Or, at the least, lying still and weeping. Not heaving her body beneath his, not participating fully in this strangely familiar act's intensity.

Yes, humans must be born knowing how to do this. Because once they began, neither had any difficulty at all knowing how to continue.

Her gasps stopped suddenly, and he heard her voice lifting into a cry that started somewhere deep inside her chest. Her pelvis stopped moving-but the strong muscles inside her, muscles he hadn't realized a woman possessed, started contracting instead. Convulsing around him, while she shuddered and uttered another of those strangled howls.

He lasted for a few more strokes, and then he, too, lost his mind completely. Crying out deeper and longer than she had, his body moving in its own jerky rhythm (as deep inside her as he could get, now), while an ecstasy

he'd never imagined burned outward from the place where they were connected, and spread until every atom of his flesh could feel the pleasure.

No wonder she was trembling, and claspng her legs around him, and gasping out his name. No wonder, if this was what she was feeling, too!

"CeeCee," he murmured, a few moments later after the wave that bore him along had crested and broken at last. He was lying sprawled on top of her now, still buried deep, with her arms and legs still holding him. He thought she was crying, because he could hear her uttering what sounded like small, helpless sobs. "Oh, God, CeeCee, I'm so sorry!"

Apparently that was the most spectacularly wrong thing he could have said, instead of being-like everything else he'd said and done, until now-the most fatefully right. She went stiff in his arms, and she let him go. She answered, "Well, get off me, then!", in a familiar and decidedly cross tone.

He lifted up. Even in the dusk that was now filling the room, he saw the dark stains on her slip...he hoped that having her underwear and her skirt beneath her while they'd coupled had been enough to protect Aunt Caroline's guest room quilt. Because if it hadn't, they were in trouble!

What was he thinking? They were in trouble for other reasons. Far more serious ones, compared to which even the most valuable of bed coverings didn't matter one bit.

\* \* \*

"We'll tell Uncle Jay and Aunt Caroline, when they get back, that we want to get married. With any luck, we won't have to explain to them why we have to." Cecily heard her cousin's voice, and saw his anxious face above her; and she knew she ought to be thrilled at what he was saying. They could get married now, not later! She wouldn't have to worry about him, when his Academy training took him inevitably out to sea. She wouldn't have to go back to Pilgrim College, and sit in classes with other "young ladies" who were (she now realized) innocent little girls. Because whether or not she'd meant it for that, she had just taken her first step on the road of real adulthood...why wasn't she feeling the way she ought to feel? Proud and triumphant; possessive, and loving, and pleased?

"Just a minute!" she said, and slid off the bed. Leaving her lover lying there on his side, with his body supported on one elbow; looking ridiculous, with his pants still open. Not that she looked any better, she supposed, as she fumbled to pull on her underwear and then hauled her stained slip and skirt down over it.

Good. The guest room quilt was wrinkled, but not bloody. Or wet and

sticky, either, with another fluid that had come from her lover's body to fill her loins, that spilled out of her when she rose from prone position at last. Every practical Stinnett chromosome she possessed sprang into action now, as her partner joined her on his feet and blushing closed his trousers. "Look, Jamie. If we get married, you can't go back to the Academy and I can't go back to college. It's against the rules for both places. Isn't it?"

"Well...yes. I guess it is." He hadn't thought about that yet. Of course he hadn't, the big romantic nitwit!

"Then we'll wait." She made it an announcement, not a proposal. God (whose fault this was, she decided, for giving both male and female bodies such passionate needs!) would just have to understand.

She didn't *want* to stay home, and work around the house with Mama, instead of returning to New Hampshire. If she got married and stayed here, she wouldn't even have high school to go to now! And she wasn't qualified to take a school of her own, to go to work as a teacher, with only one semester of college behind her.

Not to mention that although she was preparing to be a schoolteacher because a young woman really couldn't work at anything else (expect nursing, or secretarial work-ugh!), she had no interest at all in taking charge of a schoolhouse like the one where she'd been educated until she finished Grade 8. She wanted to earn a full-fledged B.A. (in theology, of course, since she was attending a Bible college), and that meant staying at Pilgrim for almost four more years while Jamie escaped from Maine Maritime's intensively scheduled Bachelor of Marine Science program a year ahead of her.

She would worry about him during his shipboard training cruises, yes. But if he didn't go back, he couldn't learn how to be a ship's officer by today's increasingly exacting standards; and he would have no business trying to run Stinnett Steamships, one day when Papa couldn't do that himself anymore.

She had wanted every second of the lovemaking they'd just shared, but she definitely did not want to get married. Not now. Not for a long time yet, until after they'd both finished their degrees-and maybe, even, worked for awhile. She could surely do something with a B.A. besides teach in a country schoolhouse!

"CeeCee, we can't wait." He was putting his hands on her shoulders as he spoke. Big, powerful hands, that made her body tingle as she remembered how they'd felt caressing her in places that she now had safely covered again. "You know as well as I do, what we just did is a sin unless you're married."

"So we sinned." Yes, she supposed they had. Technically, anyway. Even though she couldn't for the life of her understand why, if God meant for people her age and Jamie's to stay celibate while unwed, He'd seen fit to torment them

by giving them both such strong desires to be otherwise! “People do that sometimes. But I’m not so sure it’s wrong for us to make love if we know we’ll be getting married someday, Jamie.” Dared she keep talking? Tell him everything she’d just been thinking, and hope that he might agree with her?

His handsome face, which already showed some of a blue water man’s weathering, was setting itself into stubborn lines. She knew those lines well, because she’d seen them often enough in her mirror. He said, “The Bible’s pretty clear, CeeCee. Either we get married, or we can never touch each other like that again. Not without seeing the preacher first, anyway.”

“Is that how you want it?” She felt a moment’s panic. Would she stand a real chance of losing him, if she walked out of this bedroom without claiming his promise to become her husband-on his own terms? Which meant doing it as soon as they could get the license?

“Not really. But it’s how it’ll have to be.” His hands fell away from her shoulders, and he went on staring at her when she wanted more than anything else in the world for him to take her in his arms. To hold her again and kiss her, even though they couldn’t dare to sleep together tonight in one of the cold rooms upstairs.

“Jamie, I can’t do that. We will get married, won’t we? When it’s time, like we’ve always planned? But not now.” She put finality into her voice, and still she couldn’t manage to keep a plea for reassurance from joining it. She didn’t want to marry him now; she couldn’t marry him now. And yet, how could she bear to risk losing him?

“Of course we will. CeeCee, I love you!” Once he forgot that men in general, and Maine island men in particular, weren’t supposed to speak openly about love to their women, this man could do it remarkably well. “I guess you’re right. We made a mistake, because we’re human and we’ve got...well...mortal bodies. God will understand that, as long as we’re sorry we lost control and we don’t do it again. Not until we’ve got the right to, I mean.”

They stepped out into the kitchen together, and looked around as if neither had seen that room before. The past half hour had changed things between them forever, whether or not James wanted to think it had, and the whole world looked different to Cecily now.

And yet, the mundane things were exactly the same. She walked carefully around the glass that littered the floor in front of the sink, as she went after an oil lamp to light against dusk that was arriving at what should have been early afternoon; and she said as she did so, “Jamie, you’d better get the broom and take care of that. Before it gets either one of us in any more trouble!”

Her voice sounded calm, but as she struck a match on one of the stove covers she saw that her hands were shaking. And there was nothing she could do

about it, except hope that if she ignored the tremors they would go away before the storm blew itself out. Before Len Cayford's paramour had her baby, and Cecily's mother and father returned home.

\* \* \*

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