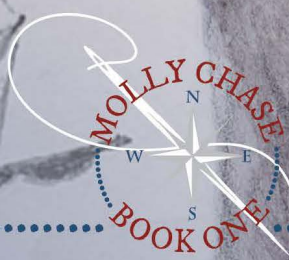


“A winning blend of
liveliness and deeper themes,
this carefully crafted tale
was a joy to read.”

JOCELYN GREEN

Christy Award-winning author of
A Refuge Assured and *The Windy City Saga*



MOLLY CHASE
N
W E
S
BOOK ONE

IN PIECES

Award-Winning Author

RHONDA ORTIZ

Advanced Praise

“THIS DELIGHTFUL HISTORICAL ROMANCE IS SO REFRESHINGLY ALIVE. IT IS not deadened by the supercilious contempt for the past that characterizes so much contemporary historical fiction, nor is it killed with the cynicism of pride or with hallmarked schmaltzy sweetness, the two extremes which are the death of true romance. It is as fresh and alive as Miss Austen in its treatment of really believable people in a believably real world. It breathes the life of realism, philosophically understood, into the reality it depicts.”

— JOSEPH PEARCE, author of *Catholic Literary Giants*

“RARELY HAVE I ENCOUNTERED A DEBUT NOVEL AS WELL TOLD AS THIS ONE. *In Pieces* took me captive from the first scene and held me fast to the end. This seamless story is woven into a rich historical tapestry, threaded with intrigue, and shaped by characters who grow, change, and take their faith seriously. A winning blend of liveliness and deeper themes, this carefully crafted tale was a joy to read. I can't wait to see the adventures Molly Chase and Josiah Robb have next.”

— JOCELYN GREEN, Christy Award-winning author of *A Refuge Assured* and *The Windy City Saga*

“READERS OF HISTORICAL ROMANCE WILL FIND CONGENIAL COMPANY IN THIS novel's plucky, winsome lead duet who must thread their individual paths through spiritual crises, hostile social pressures, and the lingering effects of past trauma to find peace together. Ortiz particularly shines as an observer of courtship dynamics that, though shaped by the period's expectations, will find echoes in many contemporary relationships.”

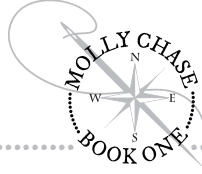
— KATY CARL, author of *As Earth Without Water* and editor in chief of *Dappled Things*

“UNFORGETTABLE! WITH HER SHARP, SOPHISTICATED BRAND OF WRITING, author Rhonda Ortiz has canvassed a remarkable breadth of history in this epic debut set during post-Revolutionary America. A time when New England’s shipping ports gave rise to international intrigue and the ever-present threat of an infant country being drawn back into war. Amid the cleverly colorful cast, Molly and Josiah are especially endearing as they explore what it means to become family while navigating their joys, sufferings, and the uncertainties in between. And at its core, love in its truest, purest form—that sacred bond between a man and a woman exemplified on the Cross by a love greater than ourselves—believing that only through sacrifice can we learn to give wholly and unconditionally to its cause. *In Pieces* is a novel that will remain on the heart long after the last page. Bravo!”

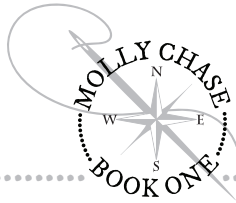
— KATE BRESLIN, bestselling author of *Far Side of the Sea*

“WHILE ENGAGING THE READER IN A DELIGHTFUL TALE OF ROMANCE, SEWING, seamanship, and early American political intrigue, *In Pieces* also teaches us the importance of seeing well—of seeing with the heart. The essential questions of life—the nature of true love, finding meaning in suffering, how to make a good marriage, the primacy of faith and conscience, and the gift of family—make this spiritually satisfying historical fiction as rich in depth as it is fun to read.”

— SARAH BARTEL, moral theologian, founder of Cana Feast,
and coeditor of *A Catechism for Family Life*



IN PIECES



IN PIECES

RHONDA ORTIZ



CHRISM
PRESS

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed in this novel are either fictitious or used fictitiously.

IN PIECES

Copyright © 2021, Rhonda Ortiz

All rights reserved. Reproduction in part or in whole is strictly forbidden without the express written consent of the publisher, with the exception of a brief quotation for review purposes.

Cover art by Xoë White

Cover background images from Shutterstock

Cover design by Rhonda Ortiz

Chrism Press, a division of WhiteFire Publishing

13607 Bedford Rd NE

Cumberland, MD 21502

ISBN:

978-1-941720-43-1 (print)

978-1-941720-44-8 (digital)

FOR JARED.

Sacramentum hoc magnum est, ego autem dico in Christo et in Ecclesia.

AND FOR MY PARENTS.

Dad, thank you for suggesting I write again.

Mom, thank you for reading and loving every draft of this book.

I should blush
To see you so attired; swoon, I think,
To show myself a glass.

— Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*

Part One:
Black Bombazine

Chapter One

MARCH 1793

MOLLY CHASE SHOULD HAVE BEEN IN CHURCH. NOT SKULKING IN THE ALLEY behind the merchant buildings like a common thief. Not braving the March weather or hoping the few men wandering the streets near Boston Harbor would overlook her horse and wagon.

She needed to raid Papa's warehouse before his creditors did.

A year ago today, the churchmen laid Mama's body to rest in the graveyard. Eight weeks ago, they laid Papa's body to rest beside hers. Now everything Papa had owned, including his business holdings, belonged to his indebted estate. His lawyer would know if something went missing before next week's auction. Molly's one hope was to take what she needed before Mr. Young checked current inventory against the old lists. Before he realized that he was missing a receipt.

But to risk his anger to steal cloth, of all things? Even if it was the finest *indienne* muslin? Mr. Young insisted everything must be sold if they were to pay off Papa's debts, and textiles were valuable.

All this fuss for mere frippery. Her plan was ridiculous. She was ridiculous.

Thou shalt not steal.

Molly leaned against the flaking warehouse door. Her plan wasn't ridiculous, but justifiable. List the reasons. Make the case.

She could no longer bear the nightmares. Thoughts of Papa's lacerated wrist and blood-soaked waistcoat pervaded her mind, day and night. Hiding away in her room would no longer do. She needed a task, a problem to solve—something.

And dressmaking provided the perfect distraction. Papa might have complained about his well-heeled daughter sewing for her friends, but Mama had understood that she was an artist and clothing was her medium. Mama would tell her to fight darkness with light.

Sew. Reclaim her imagination. Conquer the nightmares. Be happy.

But in order to sew, she needed cloth.

But this cloth? One might argue the muslin belonged to her, not the estate. Papa had not ordered it. She had. She had managed his brokerage

business while he drank away his sorrow. Two months ago she could have taken whatever she wanted. No meddling lawyer. No questions asked.

A line of logic perhaps only she understood. She would never convince Mr. Young. He would point out that she paid for the muslin with her father's money, not hers.

A whistle shrilled through the fog, followed by bells and shouts and commands. Molly looked around the corner and down the long cobblestone street. Charcoal clouds gathered on the eastern horizon. In the distance she could see the top yard of a mainmast gliding toward the wharf—a ship trying to outrun the coming storm.

She had no time to loiter. Molly squared her shoulders, reminded herself that *she* was in charge, and pushed open the door.

Stench emanated from the darkness—the faint reek of decaying flesh, hiding somewhere in the recesses of the silent warehouse. Like Papa, lying on the study floor. Blood everywhere. His sinews exposed—

She reached for the weathered doorframe and gripped it, forcing herself to the present. “Silk, linen, muslin, wool. Like paint for the painter or stone for the sculptor. It's but a smell. Ignore it.”

Molly covered her nose with her handkerchief and stepped inside, waiting for her vision to adjust to the dim light filtering through the shuttered windows. Then she pulled her petticoat close and weaved through the dusty shelves toward the northern end of the warehouse.

Three long cedar chests covered with canvas tarpaulins lined the wall—their textile storage made by Papa years ago. Unfortunately, the stench was stronger back here, and she needed both hands to handle the cumbersome bolts.

She inhaled and lowered the handkerchief. Disgusting, but she could manage for five minutes—long enough to take what she wanted and leave. She hoped the cloth hadn't absorbed the odor. She pushed aside a French cherry table, its delicate inlay cracked from too many years in storage, then stepped to the first chest and pulled the tarpaulin off the lid and onto the floor. With a heave, she swung the lid up and back against the wall and looked inside.

Muslin-covered rolls waited for inspection. She shimmed a roll out of the chest and dropped it with a thump on top of the cherry table. Off came her gloves, and she unrolled the bolt. The turquoise Lyon silk satin. She unrolled the bolt a few more inches and lifted the corner of the silk with her fingertips, feeling its warp and weft. This would be the last from Lyon. France's revolutionaries thought silk too aristocratic and were closing their factories. She hadn't planned on taking the satin, but maybe...maybe she

should. And what about the mauve taffeta? And the ivory gauze silk, while she was at it. Could she layer taffeta and gauze for that *robe à la turque* she was contemplating? She could try—

Enough of gowns. Not right now. Concentrate.

Molly opened the second chest. At the top sat a box of fashion babies—wooden dolls wearing replicas of the latest French gowns. She rummaged until she found the one wearing a round gown with a high waist. She had never seen the like—it resembled a Greek toga. Mr. Peterson, Papa’s supplier, said the style was some mantua-maker’s ridiculous experiment and no one was wearing it. But Molly liked it. She set the baby and box aside and reached for another bolt.

One of the delicate muslins, at last. She set it beside the silk and pulled out another. Tingles ran up her spine, her mind dwelling on gathers and bias, pleats and boning, embroidery and trim. All else faded—the stench, the patter of rain, the chill, the dust scratching her throat.

Time itself.

The sage brocade for Prudence? Tabitha would like the rose taffeta. If only Rachel hadn’t moved away—she would love the cherry blossom chintz. But the turquoise satin ought to be worn only by someone with a flair for the dramatic. Joy Christianson?

She must try to *see* Joy, as Mama taught her. The best of gowns flattered not only a woman’s body but her soul. “Artists must be observant and empathetic,” Mama had said. “Look for the goodness in others, and art will follow.”

Molly closed her eyes and imagined her friend’s cheerful face.

Joy was friendly. Popular but not conceited. Knew her own mind. Sometimes stubborn. Often clumsy. Always fashionable...

New round gown style...satin...loom width, twenty-four inches... Joy was five foot five...twelve yards...lining, trimming, embroidery... silk thread...

“Hello? Mr. Chase? Are you here?”

Molly jumped. Her arm flailed and knocked the chest lid loose. Her hand snapped to grab it before it landed on her head.

A tall man wearing a battered greatcoat stood at the door, scanning the warehouse. Shadows shrouded his face.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Distracted by the stench, she had forgotten to close the door.

“Who’s in here?” the man barked.

Josiah Robb.

Molly flipped behind the nearby shelf. She intended to avoid Mr. Young, but given the choice between Mr. Young and Josiah, she would have chosen the solicitor without a second thought. Josiah was the son of their former cook and had grown up under their roof. He was as familiar to her as a brother—as dear and as exasperating.

He had also been Papa’s favorite child. Never mind that he wasn’t even his son.

That ship coming in—it must have been his ship, the *Alethea*. Why could it not have come tomorrow? Why was he not there? Officers had things to do.

Molly laid a fist against the shelf. She was in for it. Josiah had a sixth sense for catching her at her worst and mercilessly teasing her. And he just found her sneaking around Papa’s warehouse, pilfering goods. But she needn’t explain herself. Best to affect nonchalance and deflect his curiosity.

“It’s me,” she called sweetly, as if a Sunday morning visit to Papa’s warehouse was a regular occurrence.

“Molly?”

“Yes.”

Josiah’s footsteps rang against the plank flooring. “Whew! It stinks in here. I can’t believe you made it past the door.”

She returned to her rummaging.

“And nice to see you too.” He pulled his wet tricorn hat from his head. “I’ve been away for months. The least you could do is say hello.”

He tossed the hat and greatcoat on top of the remaining unopened chest and leaned against its side, hovering over her. He smelled of grime and sweat, as he always did when he came home. Years ago she had made the mistake of teasing him about it, and he had retaliated by sneaking into her room and leaving his saltwater-stained laundry on top of her pillow. Cleanliness was a touchy subject.

“I saw the door open,” he said.

“And I saw the *Alethea* coming in, half an hour ago,” Molly countered. “Shouldn’t you be with your ship?”

“An hour and a half ago, you mean.”

Had she really been here that long? Goodness, she was a horrible thief.

“And don’t worry about Perdita. I gave her a feed bag.”

Where had he found oats for the horse? Josiah’s resourcefulness always astonished her. *He* could turn criminal and never get caught.

“Because you asked, the ship is secure, cargo is staying aboard until tomorrow, and I’m not on watch, so the captain gave me permission to go surprise Mother and Deb.”

Molly's heart twisted. She had been avoiding the Robbs. His sister had called on her twice this past week, but Molly had been out of sorts and refused to see her. Not that she didn't love sweet, faithful Deborah. But she dreaded telling the Robbs the truth about Papa. Their families were close. They ought to know. Yet she also thought Papa's shame should die with him.

"Enough about me." Josiah craned to see inside the chest. "What are you doing?"

She sighed, spared him a little glance. "I'm looking for something."

"You're looking for something?"

"Yes."

"Here, in the dark, dank warehouse?"

"Is that so surprising?"

"Today is Sunday, Molly."

She leaned farther into the chest and pulled out another bolt of muslin.

"*Mercoledì.*" He muttered something in—Spanish? Italian? Some other foreign tongue he had picked up in his travels?

Molly ignored his linguistic swaggering and examined the bolt instead. Josiah was quick with languages, facts, figures, philosophy, theology, and everything else that came in the form of schoolwork. And he always rubbed it in. Growing up, they had taken their French lessons together until Papa realized she was a dunce and was holding back Josiah. Then Papa spoiled Josiah with Latin, even though he didn't need it.

"I want to try my hand at a new style of round gown. It has a high waist, like this." She clinched her sides under the bust.

Josiah laughed. "All right, Moll-Doll. You need yet another gown. But I cannot believe you would brave the weather and the vermin for the sake of your excessive vanity. And breaking the Sabbath too, you heathen."

The command to keep the Sabbath wasn't the only commandment she had broken today. But she wasn't vain. Her wardrobe was minimal and conservative. She left ornamentation to her friends and ostentation to women outside of Massachusetts. She knew he was joking, but the accusation still rankled. "I thought we had grown past that old argument."

"Hardly. It's my favorite pet assumption about you."

The wind rattling the window shutters recalled Molly to the task at hand. Too much time had been wasted in arguing. Josiah needed to go before someone heard them.

"Could you move?" She pointed to the unopened chest where he perched. "Silk thread is in there, and you're in my way."

He didn't budge. "Can't you buy some tomorrow?"

“I want it now.”

“How do you know it’s in here?”

“Are you not supposed to be home by now?”

“Trying to get rid of me?”

“Yes. I’m in a hurry. After all, it *is* Sunday, and I’m not supposed to be here.”

He smirked. “Then why not get the thread later?”

“Josiah!” Molly stamped her foot as if they were still eight and ten. So much for her supposed nonchalance. “I have no time for this!”

He had trapped her in her own words. And throwing childish tantrums while he remained coolheaded meant that *he’d won*.

Then his smirk softened, and his eyes held hers. Her frustration melted away, and the smile she could not hide pinched her cheeks. “You provoking man. I’ve missed you.”

“Of course you have.” Josiah winked. Then he straightened to his full height and tossed on his hat and greatcoat. He pushed past her and hoisted several rolls of cloth onto his shoulder—unlike her, merchant sailors were used to hauling things. “I’ll come back for the rest.”

“No!” Molly dropped the tarpaulin that she had begun to remove. “I’ll do it myself.”

A wave of rain pelted the roof. He glanced up and quickened his pace toward the door.

“Please.” She ran and grabbed him by his coat sleeve, pulling him to a stop. “I mean it. You cannot be seen with this cloth.”

Josiah set the bolts on a nearby shelf. “Why?” he asked, ever so calmly. But his brow lifted, demanding the truth. He knew she was up to no good. He would know—as children they had often been up to no good together.

“It’s only that—”

She squirmed. Could she still hide? She should have hidden when he first showed up.

He smiled his stubborn smile. “Only what, Molly?”

Molly opened her mouth to explain, but her excuses wouldn’t come. Nothing would negate the fact that she was stealing what was not legally hers. Josiah would poke a hundred holes in her argument. “Mr. Young does not know I’m taking these,” she admitted, her cheeks hot, “and I would rather not drag you into our dispute.”

“Why not ask your father?” Josiah frowned. “He doesn’t know you’re helping yourself to his stores?”

Papa. Josiah had just returned from sea. He did not know about Papa.

Heaviness sank into her chest. She had to tell him the horrible news. Papa's body, on the floor of his study. His wrists, the knife, the blood—one could hardly tell the one from the other.

She squeezed her eyes shut. The image refused to disappear.

"I take that as a *no*, he doesn't." Josiah's growl pulled her to consciousness. He lifted her stack of cloth again. "I don't know why I do these things for you."

She waved away his words. "I need to collect the thread."

Molly walked back to the unopened chest, gripped its lid, and swung it upward. Out came a wave of foulness. A dead raccoon. How had it gotten in? Its flesh, rotted. She gagged. It filled her lungs, stung her eyes. Her feet stumbled.

The study door opened. A force pulled her inside. Metallic blood. Spilled wine. She circled the polished desk, piled high with tradesmen's bills. Shattered glass crunched beneath her feet. Papa was on the floor, sprawled across the scarlet-stained hearthstones, the knife in his hand. His handsome mouth drooped open, but his spittle had dried—

—the miniature of Mama, broken in pieces—

—her own lungs, dying in her chest—no air—bile in her stomach—no legs beneath her—

"Molly! Talk to me!"

Molly opened her eyes. Josiah had her by the elbows, all but lifting her off the floor, his panicked face inches from her own.

"He killed himself," she confessed. "I'm stealing this because he's dead."

Then she vomited.

Chapter Two

JOSIAH LEFT THE CLOTH AND TOOK MOLLY HOME TO MOTHER.

Their short ride was silent. Molly hugged herself and slumped on the seat beside him. She wouldn't look at him—perhaps because of the sleet, or mortification, or absence of mind. Or all three. He couldn't tell.

He hadn't minded the vomit. He had suffered worse from his shipmates. What he did mind was the way her eyes glazed over and that she had not heard his shouts. Growing up, he had often wanted to shake sense into her. But not like *that*.

Mr. Chase dead, Molly added. His mind reeled. Two people he treasured, for different reasons. Mr. Chase, because he and his wife had supported Josiah's family and helped him grow to manhood after his father died. Molly, because he never could help himself.

The horse's hooves clopped as they made their way along empty Milk Street, the westerly wind driving against them. Molly's teeth were chattering. She looked terrible. Too thin, as if she hadn't been eating.

He grimaced then turned to the Hackney horse. "Perdita. Trot on."

Perdita picked up her pace.

At times like this, he hated his profession. He loved the sea, and he liked his captain and mates, but being away for months at a time was wearing on him. He always missed his loved ones, but today he realized that they also missed him. Molly badly needed a friend. He knew what it was to lose a parent. She had lost both, and he hadn't been here for her.

The wagon hit a rut as they rounded the corner onto Marlborough Street, jolting them from reverie. Molly unfolded herself and gripped the seat for balance. She wasn't so closed off now. Still, she would not glance his way. He wished he could take her hand, for his sake as much as hers. But that was not and never had been their way, and he wasn't about to start now.

Josiah turned the wagon onto his street and stopped in front of the timber frame house his family called home. It was small, but it was his, which was all that mattered. His job alone didn't pay much, but between thrift and some fortunate investments, he had secured the house a few years ago at the mere age of twenty. He had been motivated. A wife couldn't be brought home unless there was a home to be brought to.

Come to think of it, he wasn't sure if Molly had seen their house. She had been so preoccupied with Mrs. Chase's illness that she had hardly left her own home these past few years. The Robbs always went to them.

He hoped she liked it.

Mother and Deb's excited faces appeared through the wet, wavy glass of the front bay window as soon as Josiah pulled Perdita to a stop on the street. But their expressions dimmed when they noticed Molly, and they quickly disappeared.

He jumped down and circled around the wagon to help Molly. But she did not take his proffered hand. Her eyes still stared into the distance.

"Carry her upstairs, son." Mother now stood beside him, the rain dotting her starched linen cap. Her hands went to her hips. "Deborah, hot water and towels."

His sister ran inside. Josiah turned back to Molly. “Come on, Moll-Doll. Arms about my neck.”

Molly blinked at him then complied. He swung her down and caught her under her knees, adjusted his grip, then carried her up the front steps and into the house.

The only other time he had reason to carry Molly had been when they were children, not long after his father died and his family had moved in with the Chases—she had fallen and cut her head while they were playing. They had still been getting used to each other then. She had been leery of him, an intruder in her home, though she tried to be his friend per her mother’s instructions. He, in turn, had been overawed by her. Molly Chase, the prettiest girl he had ever known, had become his playmate. Her company had soothed his grief. And teasing her, he had quickly discovered, was a lot of fun.

Molly had protested to being carried then, and she would have protested now, if she were aware of her surroundings. Under only one set of circumstances would she probably tolerate being carted around in a man’s arms—as a bride. For years he had hoped and labored for the right to carry her over his threshold and welcome her home. Given her mother’s illness, he had delayed the actual courtship, but a plan was in place.

And here she was, dazed, shivering, and covered in vomit. This was not how he had envisioned this moment.

With Mother on his heels, Josiah maneuvered Molly up the narrow staircase and into the women’s room. He lowered her down onto the bed, trying not to startle her, then stepped out of Mother’s way and bolted across the passage to his room to change. Captain Harderwick was going to be furious—Josiah had promised he would be back in an hour.

He was buttoning his waistcoat when Deb poked her head in the door. “May I come in?”

Across the hall, Molly was vomiting again.

Deb bent down and picked the soiled garments from off the floor. She laid them on his chair. “Hannah told me that Molly locked herself in her room for weeks.” Hannah and her brother Thomas were the last remaining servants at the Chase home. “I tried visiting her, several times. She wouldn’t see me.”

Her voice was sad and worried—and a tinge resentful.

“It’s not personal,” Josiah said. “She’s grieving.”

“She ignored me.” Deb folded her arms across the bodice of her wool gown and pouted as only a sixteen-year-old girl could. “Obviously, she wanted to see *you*.”

Actually, Molly hadn’t wanted to see him—he stumbled upon her mid-burglary. But Deb didn’t need to know that.

Her tears swelled. “We aren’t close like you are. I was always the *baby*.”

Out came the old argument—that Molly made a better sister than she. When it came to Molly, Deb alternated between adoration and jealousy. Today must be an occasion for the latter.

Josiah patted her shoulder. “You aren’t a baby. No crying now.” He dropped his hand to tackle the last of his waistcoat buttons. They strained in their holes—this old suit was far too small in the back and shoulders. “Molly cannot leave. Even if she protests, she stays.”

“But she doesn’t like me.”

“She likes you fine. If she would not see you, then it was because she couldn’t.”

He took back what he thought about hating his profession. Being at sea with easygoing, honest chaps who didn’t complain or cry over perceived slights? Sounded like heaven.

“I’ve been home barely fifteen minutes,” he said. “I don’t want to quarrel with you.”

Tears ran down Deb’s face.

Josiah opened the drawer of his oak bureau and pulled out a clean cravat, trying to think of a way forward. Hers was a character he did not understand. Here he had brought home their oldest friend, ill and in distress, and all Deb could think about were her own hurt feelings. He could point out her selfishness, but she would cry all the more, as if he had shattered her world.

If he were any other man, he might chalk it up to her being a girl. But the other women in his life were not like this. Deb’s touchiness was unique to Deb. And she felt uncertain around Molly, not only because of him but because of her appearance. For Molly was the town beauty. And Deb was short and stocky.

Very stocky.

He had told her numerous times that she was pretty, with her blond curls, rosy cheeks, and the gray eyes they had inherited from Mother. It didn’t matter. Nothing a brother said would convince her that she was anything but an inelegant dumpling. And she envied Molly’s “perfect figure” and “dainty features” and “chocolate eyes” and “chocolate hair” and “easy confidence”—in short, everything Deb lacked. Josiah liked those things about Molly too,

but listening to his sister's pathetic descriptions almost made him wish Molly were less attractive. Almost.

Perhaps that was the issue? He couldn't say. Right now he had no interest in playing guessing games. What he needed was for Deb to act like an adult.

"I was on my way here and saw Mr. Chase's warehouse open," Josiah said, as if he hadn't noticed anything unusual. "Molly was inside, by herself, rummaging through the textiles."

Deb sniffed, still pouting.

"I poked her about it, we had our usual sparring match, and she went into a trance. She didn't see or hear me. It took me several minutes to get her to come to." He swallowed, hard. Every minute had been torture. "I've never felt so scared or powerless in my life."

Deb wiped away her tears with the back of her hand.

Josiah wrapped his cravat around his neck and turned to his shaving mirror. "Her mind is sick. Molly needs someone looking after her, someone who knows her well and can keep her condition quiet. Which means Mother." He paused, then took a risk. "And you."

"Me?"

"Yes. You."

He glanced at her through the corner of his mirror. Deb was chewing her lip.

"You trust me. So you don't think I'm a baby?"

The risk paid off. He had her compliance, and she had the approval she craved. If only it hadn't been this difficult. Cravat tied, Josiah picked up his coat from the double bed then bent down to kiss her cheek. "No. I think you're going to rise to the occasion."

She blushed.

"Don't let Molly intimidate you," he added. "I hope she has retained her fear of Mother, though who knows? She may feel daring enough to try to sneak off." He slipped his arms into his coat sleeves then tossed on his hat. "You'll keep her from leaving?"

"Simple. I'll add laudanum to her tea and blame it on you."

Josiah chuckled. She wasn't always tedious. "Rising to the occasion already."

The downstairs clock chimed three o'clock. And he needed to return Molly's wagon. He would have to run from the Chases' West End house to Long Wharf if he wanted to keep his job.

With a quick smile for his sister and a passing wave to his mother, he dashed down the stairs and out the door into the icy rain.