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# ADRIFT

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RHONDA ORTIZ

## *Praise for the Molly Chase Series*

“WEAVING A CAPTIVATING TAPESTRY OF HISTORY AND STORYTELLING, RHONDA ORTIZ deftly builds the tension in her second Molly Chase novel, *Adrift*. Brimming with insight, action, and intrigue, the story fully immerses the reader in the uncertain early years of our nation and the lives of a compelling cast of characters. The satisfying ending hints of even more excitement on the horizon—a brilliant and edifying historical read!”

—STEPHANIE LANDSEM, author of *Code Name Edelweiss*

“FIRST COMES LOVE, THEN COMES...’ A SCINTILLATING SPY PLOT, PERDURING MENTAL and emotional trauma, deep spiritual questioning, and, of course, romance. With *Adrift*, Ortiz provides a stirring sequel that weaves together historical detail and psychological complexity in a cloth as intricate as any from Penelope’s mythological loom.”

—ELEANOR BOURG NICHOLSON, author of *Brother Wolf*

“FULL OF ESPIONAGE, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL INTRIGUE, WITH HISTORICALLY ACCURATE details, *Adrift* is the exciting sequel in a series sure to have you looking at American history with fresh eyes and interest. Ortiz delves into the racial, social, religious, and mental health struggles of the time with a deft hand that leaves you aching for better for the characters but in awe of their struggle to rise above, all while serving their country. It is a must read for fans of historical novels.”

—CRYSTAL CAUDILL, author of *Counterfeit Faith*

“THE SECOND INSTALLMENT IN RHONDA ORTIZ’S MOLLY CHASE SERIES, *ADRIFT*, IS A veritable ocean of intrigue, espionage, and swoonworthy romance. This impeccably researched adventure brings eighteenth century Boston to life in the little-known-to-me Federalist period of American history, and compelling character arcs kept me turning pages far into the night. Fans of Josiah and Molly will find much to love about the continuation of their story as well as a new equally riveting pair to root for. I’m already eagerly awaiting the third book in the series!”

—AMANDA WEN, author of *Roots of Wood and Stone*

“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*, on *In Pieces*

“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*

“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*, on *In Pieces*

“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, 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 and coeditor of *A Catechism for Family Life*

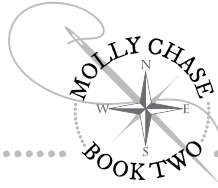


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RHONDA ORTIZ



CHRISM  
PRESS

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ADRIFT

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FOR MY GRANDMOTHER.  
Thank you for bringing music to our lives.



A course more promising  
Than a wild dedication of yourselves  
To unpathed waters, undreamed shores; most certain  
To miseries enough—no hope to help you,  
But as you shake off one to take another;  
Nothing so certain as your anchors, who  
Do their best office if they but stay you  
Where you'll be loath to be.

— Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*

Continued from *In Pieces*  
Molly Chase, Book One





## — PROLOGUE —

DUST FLOATED IN THE LIGHT THAT Poured THROUGH WAVY WINDOW GLASS INTO THE wainscoted front hall. Molly Chase's heels clicked upon the wide floorboards as she pivoted with minuscule steps—heel, toe, heel, toe—and wondered at the emptiness of her childhood home.

To the west, the drawing room, its fine furniture covered in cloth.

To the north, the front door, open to the front walk and drive, the gravel overgrown with grass.

To the east, the dining room and a barren table.

To the south, a long passage. One direction led toward the family parlor. The other led toward Papa's study. A forbidden room.

Where were the pleasant murmurs of polite conversation? Mama's melodic alto, Papa's quiet bass? The rattling of pot lids in the kitchen, the whispered scratching of Hannah's broom against the stair treads? Thomas ought to be waiting with the carriage, ready to take them to Old North Church. Why wasn't he?

The room tilted, and Molly slid southward on the balls of her feet until she stood at the crossroads of the passage. The light brightened from pale yellow to silver-gold, brighter and brighter until the room and the floor faded away and she hovered weightlessly in an expanse of white. In the distance, the shadow of a man appeared—and with him, dread.

Someone spoke her name. "Miss Chase?"

Darkness seeped into the expanse like a long, inky silk thread, and gravity returned. Through the wavy glass of the Robbs' front bay window, the morning sun blazed behind wispy clouds.

"Miss Chase?"

She turned. Major Melvill waited in the Robb family's spartan parlor, his dress cloak about his shoulders and his tricorn in hand. How long had he been standing there?

His foxlike brow arched higher. "We had best leave now, my dear. Your bridegroom is waiting."





— PART ONE —

*The North Wind*





# BOSTON

LATE MAY 1793

## *Chapter One*

RAINCLOUDS SHROUDED THE MOON, AND THE SHADOWS DEEPENED BEHIND MRS. Beatty's shrubbery, where Eliza Hall stood an inch deep in mud as she watched the Robb home across the lane.

Through the front window, she could see Molly Chase and Josiah Robb sitting beside the hearth, deep in conversation though the hour was late. She had been trailing them all evening, beginning with their arrival at Mrs. Warren's dinner party, and had followed them home after their abrupt departure. She could not see their expressions, but they looked contented and safe at home. No French spies trying to break into their house. No American traitors trying to track down missing foreign dispatches. Her evening's work was done.

The wind gusted, and the wet shrubbery branches rustled against her wool cloak and linsey-woolsey petticoat. She adjusted the cloak's hood to shield her face, then slipped out from behind the shrubbery.

A carriage stood at the street corner.

Eliza gripped the small Queen Anne pistol in her pocket. *Keen wits. Silent feet.* Then she recognized the carriage and its driver and released her grip. Thomas Melvill had sent for her. If the major was awake at this hour, the reason for his summons must be urgent. With her chin high and back straight, she strode down the street as though she hadn't been hiding in the bushes like a common thief.

"Hello, Duncan." She nodded to the broad-backed manservant leaning against the carriage's side, water dripping from his ruddy, overgrown brows and down his prominent nose.

Duncan reached for the handle and opened the door. He was not part of their intelligencer ring, but he knew enough not to ask questions. The major paid Duncan MacAlasdair handsomely for his silent cooperation.

She climbed in and settled upon the cushioned bench. Duncan closed the door behind her, and a moment later the carriage swayed as he climbed up to the driver's bench. He called a command, and they began to move.

Her thoughts went to their new intelligencer. Eliza liked Josiah Robb with the motherly warmth a woman feels for an amiable young man. He had talent and a good heart, and with experience he would prove to be an invaluable colleague. That Mr. Robb had a conscience and confessed his past involvement in the sugar trade endeared him to her all the more. A sugar plantation was hell on earth for slaves, something he had learned after making a fortune off their labor. But his ill-gotten sugar money played right into the assignment they had for him.



Pride warmed her insides. Major Melvill might have recruited Mr. Robb, but the plan was her brainchild. Mr. Robb would resign as first mate of the *Alethea* and take a menial job at Custom House. Collector of Customs Benjamin Lincoln—prepared ahead of time—would take note of his talented new employee and promote him to a position created just for him, with a lucrative salary to match. General Lincoln would give Mr. Robb an entrée into society, providing the intelligence ring with another set of eyes and ears among the rich and the powerful—those who most needed to be watched—while also keeping him near the vulnerable wharves. Two birds, one stone.

The major had praised Eliza's plan and promised to write their supervisor, Mr. Harvey, and President Washington as soon as Mr. Robb accepted their offer. And Mr. Robb himself had made a good impression on the presidential cabinet. She looked forward to working with him.

Miss Chase, however...

Eliza flicked a thread from her petticoat and stared out the carriage window into the darkness past the carriage's lantern light. Mr. Robb's doe-eyed sweetheart irritated her, mainly because the woman's foolishness over Daniel Warren reminded her of her own. She knew her dislike was petty, and though she could hardly help it, she must. They needed Miss Chase's cooperation.

The carriage rumbled through Boston's West End until it arrived at the Melvills' three-story clapboard house on Green Street. Eliza alighted as soon as the wheels halted upon the drive. With her own key, she let herself into the rear entrance, and after removing her wet outerwear and wiping the mud from her shoes, she climbed the back staircase to the servants' passage. No light shone through its one window, but she knew her way in the dark. The floorboards moaned beneath her specially made rubber soled shoes until she reached the study door at the end of the passage. She turned the well-oiled knob and cracked open the door.

The major was sitting in his wing chair beside the hearth, where a small fire burned. His bent briar pipe hung from his mouth, as usual. James Walden—her cousin Lydia's husband, a fellow intelligencer, and the Warren family's butler—sat opposite him. Eliza lived with the Waldens and their daughters in Beacon Hill, Boston's African neighborhood. On the other side of the room, immaculately and expensively dressed despite the hour, was Antoine-Jean-Paul-Marie de Laurent—former French army officer, American intelligencer, exiled aristocrat, and her closest friend.

That James would visit Melvill at night did not surprise her. A butler spent long hours on duty; Mrs. Warren would notice daytime absences. But Antoine worked at Custom House, same as the major. They could meet whenever they wanted. What business demanded the whole ring's immediate attention?

Antoine caught Eliza's gaze through the crack in the door. His expression remained stoic, but his attention fixed on her a moment longer than it should have. Her heart pitter-pattered like the rain against the nearby window, but her feet remained rooted to the floor, as she had trained them to do.

"Her eyes were open." James's mellow voice was barely audible over the popping

coals. “Everyone thought she fainted, but I would bet my last penny she was out of her mind.”

*She.* Eliza’s ears strained.

“Tis odd, to be sure,” Major Melvill replied, “and it puts the plan into question, if her mind is disturbed. If he is to marry her—”

“She left no one in doubt of which man she preferred. Scolded Daniel Warren in front of everyone and asked for Mr. Robb instead.”

They were speaking of Miss Chase.

“Another delectable morsel from the scandalmongers.” Antoine’s voice was droll. “And here we thought they had recovered their footing.”

“Don’t blame Miss Chase,” James said. “That drunken gundiguts was slobbering all over her from the moment she arrived. He deserved a tongue-lashing.”

“Mr. Robb’s encounter with Mr. Genêt has become common knowledge.” As a Custom House clerk, Antoine heard the lion’s share of men’s gossip. “Miss Chase was his excuse for refusing a letter of marque. He was already honor-bound to marry her.”

“Yes, but we cannot have her forgetting herself when her husband is in the middle of an investigation,” the major said. “I may have to rescind my offer—immediately.”

“She’s usually self-possessed,” James insisted. “He can pull her around. I don’t want to give up on her yet.”

*Out of her mind. Forgetting herself.* Good heavens, what entanglement had they gotten themselves into? Eliza opened the door wide and stepped inside the study. “My plan has one glaring flaw, doesn’t it?”

The men turned her way. Major Melvill pulled the pipe from his mouth. “James was giving me an account of the party. We have a problem. A big problem.”

## Chapter Two

“YOU HAVE MY HEARTY CONGRATULATIONS,” MRS. BEATTY SAID AS SHE HELPED HERSELF to a second cup of coffee at the Robbs’ breakfast table. Mrs. Robb and Deb bustled around her, clearing dishes and handing them to Josiah to wash.

Molly glanced up from the plate she was scraping and smiled at the Robbs’ elderly neighbor. Mrs. Beatty had stopped by for her usual morning visit just in time to overhear Josiah’s marriage proposal from the back passage.

“You’re beaming. As you ought to be.” Mrs. Beatty’s rusty wool shawl slipped from one narrow shoulder as she exchanged the coffee carafe for the milk pitcher. “I should have anticipated your good news. Caesar left you a nuthatch on the back stoop, Josiah. An especially fine gift.”

Josiah chuckled at the mention of her mangy cat and reached into the tub for the next dish. But the serving platter slipped from his hand and plunked as it fell back into the dish tub, sending a wave of filmy water onto the table and the front of his black wool-silk waistcoat. “*Mercoledì.* We may have ruined every piece of my evening suit.”

Molly handed him a dry towel.

He mopped up the water. "All your hard work, Moll-Doll, gone to waste."

"Not at all."

"I may know nothing about textiles, but I'm confident water and silk don't mix."

Mrs. Robb placed another dirty platter on the table. "You could have worn my bibbed apron, son."

"Thanks, but no thanks. I have my pride."

How funny. Molly picked up the platter and scraped it with her spatula. Ruined or not, the suit was worth every stitch. She had to *see* him in order to make it, and in making it, she finally saw him. Now they were engaged. Engaged!

He leaned closer to her. "You're laughing at me."

"Am not."

"Are."

She set the platter in the dish tub and tipped her head up to see his face. "I will explain later."

"We must be engaged, if you'll let me in on your private jokes."

"Only if you let me in on yours."

"Happily, *ma chérie*. Perhaps we could hitch up Perdita and go for a drive this afternoon. I want to show you a picnic spot I found in Roxbury."

"Or perhaps you make your private jokes public," Mrs. Robb said.

They turned her way.

"You must pardon my maternal interference a little longer. No picnics."

Josiah scowled at her. Mrs. Robb replied with a firm hand on her solid hip. Deb's round cheeks turned tomato red, and Mrs. Beatty's wrinkles creased in merriment as she reached for the sugar pot.

Molly turned her attention from the warring Robb clan back to the dishes. Mrs. Robb was being a trifle overprotective. They had always been allowed to spend time alone. He wasn't—well, he wasn't *that man*.

A shiver ran down her spine. She could hardly bear to think the name of...Daniel Warren...much less say it in front of Josiah. But they would have to tell Mrs. Robb and Deb what happened at the Warrens' party, and soon, because without a doubt the entire town was talking about it.

Josiah turned her way. "This engagement is interminable. How soon can we be married?"

"Interminable? We have been engaged all of twenty minutes."

"Like I said. Interminable."

"You know the answer. Three weeks to read the banns. State law."

"Then I had best speak to Dr. Eckley on Sunday. He can begin reading them right away."

Biting her tongue, Molly set the bowl in the tub, careful not to splash him further. Dr. Eckley was pastor of Old South Meeting House, the largest Congregationalist church in town. Josiah was thinking of leaving Old South to become a Catholic, she

herself was an Episcopalian, and after the way that gossipy henhouse of a congregation had treated her, she would be content never to darken Old South's doors again. But she knew better than to object in front of Mrs. Robb.

The tension in her shoulder softened at the touch of Josiah's strong hand. *We will talk later*, it said. Then he smiled his puckish smile at his mother. "I should attempt to save this."

He set the towel aside and unbuttoned his waistcoat, exposing his damp shirt beneath. Deb exclaimed, Mrs. Robb glared, Mrs. Beatty cackled, and Molly was caught between amusement and embarrassment. Seeing Josiah in only his shirt and breeches was hardly a cause for scandal. As children, they had run through the house every evening in their nightclothes and thought nothing of it. Yet they weren't children anymore. She reached for the next dirty dish and made a show of not paying attention, though she was.

He slipped his arms out of the waistcoat and tossed it over his sister's blond head toward the opposite side of the room, where it landed squarely in the laundry basket.

"Do I have clothes anywhere?"

"In the trunk in my closet," his mother replied. "Next time, please do not use the kitchen as your dressing room."

"It's my house." Josiah circled the table and kissed Mrs. Robb on the cheek, then jogged off. A moment later, they were treated to a rousing performance of "The Sailor and His Truelove" from the upstairs passage.

*As a young sailor and his truelove one morning in May,  
Where walking together in the field blithe and gay;  
Says the sailor to his truelove, my dear life for your sake,  
I'll away unto the Indies whatever does betide,  
And when I do return, my love, I'll make you my bride.*

Mrs. Robb looked to the ceiling. "I promise I taught him better manners."

Molly stifled a yawn. "I thought he refused to sing outside of church."

"He's feeling sentimental." Deb retrieved the broom. "Congratulations, by the way. Are you certain you want to marry him?"

Molly laughed.

"I understand why he likes you," Deb continued. "Why you like him is a mystery."

It *was* a mystery. And new. Very new. Molly stole a glance at Mrs. Robb. "I do like him."

Mrs. Robb's gray eyes softened. "I am glad." She took Molly's spatula from her hands and shooed her away. "Deborah and I will finish up here. As radiant as you look, my dear, you also look fatigued. Go sit. I will bring you more coffee momentarily."

"Thank you." Molly yawned again, then unpinned her apron and hung it on the wall pegs before moving to the parlor.

Josiah's baritone reverberated more loudly in here.

*Then farewell my dearest Nancy, no longer can I stay,  
For our top-sails are loos'd, and our anchor is weigh'd;  
Then thousand kisses, then down her cheeks the tears fell,  
May the heavens protect you—dear William farewell.*

He *was* feeling sentimental. Silly, darling man. She dropped into Josiah's upholstered wing chair, leaned her heavy head against its back, and closed her eyes.

She must have dozed off, because when she lifted her head, Josiah was seated beside her in his mother's rocker, dressed in his old brown suit and wearing his spectacles. One hand held a coffee mug. The other was petting Caesar, who was curled up on his lap. The backgammon board, a stack of mail, and a second mug of coffee sat on the table. The rest of the house was silent.

"*La belle au bois dormant*," he said.

"Mmm. I'm too tired for French."

"Sleeping Beauty. We read it years ago. Remember?" He smiled as he stroked the cat's patchy, mustard-colored fur. "You were napping. It's the only reason Mother left us alone. Us and Caesar."

Apparently, Josiah had decided he liked the cat—enough to let him in the house. Molly glanced at her sewing baskets and textile bolts stacked around the parlor. Hopefully Caesar didn't have fleas.

"Everyone else is looking over the garden," he continued, "and I've been to the post office and back. A necessary chore but the distance was unbearable."

"The post office is half a mile down the road."

"The other side of the world, you mean. I didn't want to leave you. You're adorable when you sleep. Especially when you snore."

She snored? How embarrassing. "Your mother said she taught you manners. I don't believe her."

"They're perfectly polite little snores. Don't worry, they will be our secret. I fully anticipate enjoying them for the rest of our lives."

Molly's cheeks warmed. "This will take some getting used to."

"Not for me. I have wanted our marriage for a long time."

"How is it I never knew?"

He set his mug on the table beside the backgammon board, then lifted Caesar from his lap and lowered him to the floor. Caesar stretched and pressed himself against Josiah's buckled shoes before falling asleep again.

Josiah pivoted in his seat, closing the gap between Molly and himself. "Bad boyhood habits. Bad luck. I wanted to tell you years ago, but nothing went according to plan." His calloused hand covered hers. "Perhaps it was providential. I had some growing up to do."

He leaned closer, an enigmatic look on his face. Molly's heart tripped at an allegro beat. Was he contemplating a kiss?

The creak of the back door and the clicking of shoes upon the floorboards forestalled them. Deb appeared in the kitchen doorway. “Mother sent me to chaperone you.”

Josiah dropped Molly’s hand.

“I don’t like it either.” Deb crossed to her chair by the hearth and plopped down with a hefty sigh. She reached for her workbasket and retrieved her old church hat, which she was remaking with a pale pink satin from Molly’s stores.

“You were right. This engagement is interminable.” Molly reached for her coffee. “I suppose I could stomach Old South.”

“Tell us what you really think of our church,” Deb said.

Josiah picked up the pile of mail and set it on his lap. “We can have the ceremony here at home. But we need someone to officiate, and Dr. Eckley is still my pastor.”

“We could marry at Old North.”

“And I wouldn’t object, except that I’m not Episcopalian and have no plans to become so.” He turned over the first letter, read the address, set it aside, and reached for the next.

He had a point. Interdenominational marriages were common enough, but usually the woman followed the man in religion. Her pastor, Dr. Walter, would wonder at their request, and Molly had little desire to explain the circumstances. “I suppose it’s not Dr. Eckley’s fault that his congregants are horrible tittle-tattlers. But do you think he would marry us, given...”

Deb’s eyes lifted from her work.

Given the trouble they were in, thanks to her own stupidity. What would happen when Dr. Eckley read the banns at Old South? In front of everyone? Including the Warrens? Good heavens—what if someone *objected*? Her throat closed. Heaven help her, she did *not* want to cry. Not today. Molly stood, stepped over several bolts of cloth, and carried her coffee to the front bay window. The draft cooled her face.

A moment later, Josiah joined her. “Dr. Eckley stood up for us with the church board. He’s fair-minded.”

“I’m starting to think I missed my calling as a hermit.”

“Molly...”

“I hate parties, I hate society, and without a doubt, I have lost every friend. Why leave the house? Everything I want is within these four walls.” She glanced up. “I like washing dishes with you.”

That earned her a handsome smile. Josiah reached for her coffee and placed it beside Deb’s orchid plant on the table Grandfather Robb had made. He took her hand. “I like washing dishes with you too.”

“I’m ready to be married.”

“Truly?”

“Yes, truly.”

“Dr. Eckley?”

“If we must.”

“Three weeks?”

“And no later.”

“You drive a hard bargain, Moll-Doll. But I accept.”

He dipped his head lower. He *did* want to kiss her, and what was more, she wanted him to. But behind them, his sister shuffled in her seat, and he pulled Molly away from the window. “Come along. You owe me a rousing game of backgammon. And Joy Christianson—Mrs. Nichols, that is—wrote you. I have to get used to her married name.”

Molly’s friend Joy and her husband had left for their new home in Sudbury last week. “I wonder what she thinks of the town.”

“Probably a bit provincial for her fashionable tastes. Speaking of, we should talk about your mantua-making. I have a few ideas for all this cloth lying around our parlor.”

“I’m sure Deb wouldn’t object to me finishing her evening gown.”

“She wouldn’t,” his sister called across the room.

“Yes, but I was thinking—hey, now. We have a visitor.”

A boy carrying a large parcel was jogging up the front walkway. Josiah made for the front passage while Molly returned to her seat. She thumbed through the mail until she found Joy’s familiar handwriting.

“All right. Thank you.” The front door closed and Josiah reentered the room, carrying the parcel. “That was Mr. Young’s page. He sent you this.”

Papa’s lawyer. Molly set Joy’s letter on the table and took the heavy parcel. Josiah handed her a penknife, and she cut open the coarse parcel-paper to uncover a pile of paperwork and a note.

MY DEAR MISS CHASE—

I am pleased to report that following the sale of his goods and warehouse, your father’s debts have been paid in full. The monies remaining and his house and property pass to you. I regret to inform you that the prospective purchaser of your home wrote this morning to retract his interest.

Now that the estate has been settled, and given the likely change in your circumstances, you may wish to engage another agent to act on your behalf. Therefore, I respectfully withdraw my services, effective immediately. All family papers, property titles, promissory notes, record of accounts, your father’s last will and testament, and a draft on the bank are enclosed.

I remain your servant, etc. etc.

ABNER YOUNG, ESQ.

Mr. Young's cramped handwriting blurred before her. Her house. With its painted front door and black shutters and Mama's cherished English garden. Gravel crunching beneath Papa's shoes as he returned from the carriage house. Mama humming as she sewed in the parlor. Light refracting in waves through Molly's bedroom window and dancing upon the wall.

A locked door. A misplaced key. Papa's wig on the study floor, his blood pooled upon the hearthstones.

She owned the house. The haunted house.

Molly shook herself to attention and handed the note to Josiah. "Sell it."

### Chapter Three

THE MIDMORNING SUN CUT THROUGH THE WINDOWS OF THE SOUTH PARLOR AT A slant, casting its daffodil rays upon Prudence Warren's worktable. Her stomach growled from the smell of bacon wafting through the house, but her need to make headway in her studies surpassed her hunger. The selectmen were eager to publish her book on Boston's native flora, and she was behind. With one hand she steadied the branch of dangleberry—*Gaylussacia frondosa*—and with the other picked up a freshly sharpened scalpel. She laid the blade to the branch and pressed its tip through the peeling bark.

"Are your ears stuffed with cotton?" Daniel's voice echoed from the front hall. "Where is my walking stick?"

She lifted the blade and glanced at the mantle clock flanked by potted tropical plants. Five after nine. Only fifteen hours had passed since Daniel and Molly's botched engagement dinner, and he had spent every one of them drunker than a worm in a whiskey barrel. How was he even awake?

"Right away, sir." James, their butler.

"Hurry up. I want to leave sometime before Kingdom Come."

Prudence set down the scalpel, crossed the parlor's parquet floor, and tiptoed down the passage toward the hall. Daniel was pacing near the front door, his ridiculous beaver bicorn hat perched atop his blocklike head, while James rummaged through the collection of walking sticks in the umbrella stand. Through the window, she spotted Daniel's gig waiting on the gravel drive.

"Where are you headed?" she asked.

Her brother turned and glared. "None of your business, Porcupine."

"Does Mother know you are leaving?"

"Does it matter?"

"It will when you fail to show up for breakfast."

Daniel snatched the walking stick that James had unburied from the stand. "Philadelphia. And yes, she knows."

Prudence bit the side of her mouth to keep from smiling. Papa and Daniel



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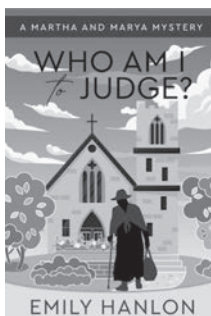
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