

A Worthy Risk

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Chapter 1

*Bath, Somerset, England
Late October 1763*

The bribe worked.

Serenity Ravensworth had never doubted it would. Amos, like his older brothers before him, quite often could be persuaded to do her bidding if his mouth and belly were satisfied with flavorful fare.

Consuming the entire Chelsea-style bun without offering Serenity so much as a taste, Amos avoided her triumphant countenance. No matter. His acceptance of the cinnamon sweet treat removed any grounds for declining the invitation to accompany her to the home of their dear friends the Northcrafts, in Milsom Street.

Alighting from the Ravensworth carriage where it halted at a townhouse of honey-hued Bath stone, Serenity beckoned to her brother as he finished his last bite. "Come along, Amos."

A glum sigh preceded the impudent roll of flashing eyes. Amos wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and then wiped the hand down the side of his trouser leg, trailing sticky crumbs along the seam.

Serenity reached into the coach and retrieved Amos's forgotten hat. "Where is Grandee's sovereign coin?" she asked, for the sake of confirmation.

"Here." The uncommonly tall eight-year-old patted the shallow pocket of his brass-buttoned waistcoat. "Safe."

"As I knew it would be." Serenity ruffled her younger brother's unkempt locks, equally as black and shiny as her own, before he could swat her hand away. She dropped the hat onto his head.

Though her junior by a decade and already as tall as her shoulder, he was proving trustworthy beyond his years.

"Here is a lovely surprise." Madelaine Northcraft opened the townhouse door wide, welcoming Serenity and Amos in from the soft grey October drizzle. "Jessa is down for her nap. Had I known you were coming, I'd have prepared tea. Come, I'll put the kettle on."

"Please do not go to any trouble on our account, Madelaine. It is my fault for not sending warning ahead of time." Serenity often confided in her long-treasured friend as she might have done an elder sister, if she'd had one. "You know I never wish to be a bother."

"And so you never are." Affection shone in Madelaine's smile. She took their hats and wraps, then pulled a chair in from the dining area and a stool from her sewing table, indicating they sit as she prepared a light repast.

Amos sat. Serenity did not. "That may soon change." She took a step closer to the elaborately carved wooden cradle near the hearth.

The darling child contained within slept on, undisturbed. Barely a week had passed since Serenity's last visit, but she discerned subtle changes in the girl of three months and impatiently wished naptime over so she might cradle the little one in her arms, harboring a wistful dream of being a mother herself.

With unsteady hands, Serenity retrieved spoons, a sugar dish, and tongs from the sideboard. The tinkling clatter of a china cup abruptly meeting its saucer drew Madelaine's attention.

"Serenity?" Madelaine added a small pitcher of milk to the table. "What is it?"

She released a slow breath. Madelaine knew her as well as Grandee did, and she could hide little from either of them. As a baronet's daughter, expectations for her future social position hinged on making a good match. Until that happened, Madeline and Grandee endorsed her heart's desire—to keep her family together. But with brothers here, there, and everywhere, Serenity—the lone Ravensworth sister among them—shouldered the responsibility to stanch the drifting. She petitioned the Almighty on behalf of all her brothers, though she feared Colson's choices carried an inordinate amount of detriment. For Gideon and Jonathan, she held every

confidence in their ability to succeed as they pursued their livelihoods. Mystery and uncertainty yet shrouded Amos's prospects—unless the plan Serenity formulated could work. She needed it to work.

"Do you suppose Tyree would spare a moment to speak with me?" Serenity asked.

"Of course he will. Shall I fetch him from the shop?" Madelaine unlocked the lid of her octagonal cherry tea chest. She counted six teaspoons of Young Hyson green tea leaves into the pot and let them steep.

"Thank you, no. I—I'd prefer we go to him instead, if it's all the same to you." She cast a cautionary glance toward Amos, then back to Madelaine. The conversation was one better spoken out of Amos's earshot.

Serenity clasped her hands together, steadying their tremble. She raised her chin and squared her shoulders, determined to follow through lest her courage lapse. "Amos, would you mind keeping an eye on Jessa while Madelaine and I go to the shop?"

Guarded, Amos eyed the carved cradle and shrugged. "All right. I'll watch her. She's sleeping anyhow."

"I'll send Asher in to keep you company." Madelaine linked elbows with Serenity.

"We won't be long." Serenity mustered a brittle smile to mask her apprehension. "Should the baby wake up and cry—"

"She won't cry." Amos peered down at the napping infant and repositioned the light coverlet. "I'll be here for her."

Serenity squeezed her brother's shoulder and followed Madelaine out the rear door. Across the courtyard behind the townhouse, a joinery workshop stood tucked amid the mews. Madelaine's husband, master joiner Tyree Northcraft, expertly assembled pieces to form an intricate wooden bull's-eye window frame. Ten-year-old Asher looked on, learning.

Tyree glanced up, brushed his hands on his stained apron, and doffed his workman's cap. "Madelaine, my dear. Miss Serenity. What can I do for you?"

Serenity felt anything but the definition of her own name—in truth, the rapid racing of her pulse supplanted any trace of the serene.

Madelaine whispered in Asher's ear. Without resistance, her son took up his chess case by its handle and scampered out the shop door to meet his friend.

Serenity crossed the shavings-and-sawdust-strewn floor to a window-facing workbench, admiring the oval frame. "Oh, how lovely ... " Interconnected pieces took on the appearance of wooden lace, which would require precision in cutting the glass panes for completion. One slip of a misplaced chisel could ruin the elaborate work of art. Gathering her scattered thoughts, Serenity must make her reason for coming to see Tyree clearly understood, thereby eliminating any chance to shatter her prayerfully deliberated plans. "Is this for Grandee's place at the King's Circus?"

"Aye," Tyree said. "She has some very specific notions for finishing off that townhouse, your grandmother does."

"Grandee always knows what she wants." Serenity tried to imagine where, in the almost-finished structure, the beautiful window would be installed. "And she always knows how to attain it."

Madelaine laid an encouraging hand on Serenity's arm. "And what is it that you are wanting from us, Serenity? Or from Tyree?"

Fretting would solve nothing, but in sharing her ideas with the Northcrafts, she hoped they could provide a solution to her dilemma. She blinked away the sting of unbidden tears and took a steadying breath. "I am unsure where to start—"

Tyree folded his arms across his chest, his stance wide. "Let's start with Amos. Is he finding trouble again? Is that why you brought him along this morning? Get him away from Fernsby Hall for a time?"

Unable to disguise her agitation and without forethought, Serenity picked up a chisel from Tyree's workbench. She defended her youngest brother. "Amos is a good boy with a good heart, and I don't want to see his spirit crushed."

Her fingers curled around the handle of the bevel-edged blade before she supposed she ought not meddle with the master joiner's

prized tools. Serenity cast a silent “forgive me” at Tyree and returned the chisel to its resting place alongside a wrought iron holdfast.

“Has Colson started crowing over his own importance again?” Tyree asked.

Serenity fisted her hands. “He rarely stops—whenever he deigns to come home, that is. He spends far too much time in company with Lord Brentmoor, and the baron’s influence is simply not good.” She picked up a perfectly curled wood shaving. “Not long after our father sailed for Italy, Colson began spouting that portentous verse as a spiteful way to put each of my brothers in their rightful place. ‘One for the land and one for the war, one for the church, and pray for no more.’ There is a measure of truth in it, as applied to the older three. Colson is the son to inherit, Gideon is the soldier, and Jonathan will be ordained. But Colson harps on the ‘no more’ and vociferously wishes Amos had never been born.”

“Words can build up or tear down, and whether for good or harm, their impact can be long lasting. Once spoken, there is no retrieval.” Madelaine had resided at Fernsby Hall with the Ravensworths for a time—she knew Colson as well as his eldest-brother self-serving purposes.

Tyree shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Colson has always blamed Amos for your mother’s passing.”

Serenity paced, heedless of the curly shavings littering the plank floor or residual sawdust collecting on her hem. “Amos was born before childbed fever robbed Mother of life, but to this day, Colson refuses to accept either the midwife or surgeon’s explanation of the facts.” She plunged her hands into her pockets and continued her lament. “As mean as he is, it surprises me Colson has not yet taken to calling Amos ‘No More,’ because he finds every opportunity to remind Amos his position in the line of succession inherits nothing. Amos is withdrawing. ‘Tis rare I see his smile or hear his laugh of late. His tutor tells me he is falling behind because he does not apply himself to his lessons.”

Madelaine’s brow creased and she reached for Serenity’s hand to lend comfort. Tyree’s eyes narrowed in contemplation.

"Amos spends a good deal of time away from the house," Serenity continued, "for which I cannot rightly blame him. The stables are his escape. Our stablemaster says for one so young, Amos possesses a deft and canny way with the horses. But I fear he's begun to prefer spending time with horses moreso than people."

"Training horses requires special skill," Tyree said. "Riding and hunting are all good and fine, so long as he's a gentleman—which he will be, as he is, after all, a Ravensworth. But practically speaking, it won't do him any good if a fourth son can't afford to raise and keep horses of his own. In spite of primogeniture laws, young Amos might inherit an allowance from your father's estate, but Colson's expectation has always been the lion's share once the baronet's title passes to him."

Tyree's succinct outline of the dilemma was accurate and Serenity couldn't argue. Not when the scenario plagued her thoughts during the day and resulted in an increasing number of sleepless nights.

Her glance moved across the workbench with its chisels, wrought iron holdfasts, planes, gouges, hammers, and saws. Inhaling a fortifying breath, Serenity presented her case. "Amos will need to learn and master a trade, one in which he can earn a decent living, avoid future privation, and in time support a family of his own. I should very much like to see him settled into an apprenticeship before—"

"He's but eight years," Tyree countered. "You are not unaware, I'm certain, that most lads are closer to thirteen or fourteen years of age before a seven-year contract commences."

Serenity pressed clenched hands against her middle. "But under certain circumstances, can apprentices not start as early as age ten?"

"Our Asher is already learning his way in the shop, which he will one day inherit." To her husband, Madelaine said, "With all the additional building projects and commissions of late, you commented last night at supper that you might have need to hire another joiner."

"I meant an experienced journeyman." Tyree scratched behind his ear. "Taking on a second young apprentice—one even younger

than Asher—is quite something else again.”

Serenity paced the length of the workbench. “I have shared my concerns with Grandee, as I do with you now. Providing you will take my brother on as apprentice, we would pay for Amos’s contract plus the annual wage of a journeyman to assist you.”

She stopped and faced Tyree, restating her plea. “Until a few weeks ago, Amos has been curious and bright and a quick study.” She fished in her pocket and withdrew a miniature elephant and a small hinged box. “See here. He carved these for my birthday. He likes to create things with his hands. Might that not be beneficial?”

Tyree glanced at Madelaine, whose petitioning expression mirrored Serenity’s, but his answer held reserve. “I shall give you an answer by Monday next. I simply need to think on things, consider how best to proceed.”

“If you do not agree to terms,” Serenity’s voice faltered, “I do not see another option.” Should Tyree decline to take Amos under his wing, her youngest brother could end up fulfilling an apprentice’s contract in a town farther afield or in a more distant shire, far away from Fernsby Hall. But if Tyree agreed, Amos could stay in Bath, an easy distance for frequent visits, and Serenity would be less alone. She refused to dwell overmuch on the notion, but logic forced her to acknowledge Grandee would not live forever.

“If not an apprenticeship with Northcraft Joinery, what about Kerrigan Shipping?” Madelaine suggested. “Surely Uncle Twitch could find work for Amos, when the need arises.”

Serenity held tightly to the edge of the workbench, willing her knees to hold steady. Grandee had mentioned Uncle Twitch was due back from the Colonies soon, but the last thing Serenity wanted him to do was take Amos away to Virginia or Philadelphia on his next voyage. She bit her lip. “I— I would miss Amos fiercely if he sailed so far from me.”

“We will think on it.” Tyree enfolded Serenity’s chilled hands in both his and Madelaine squeezed her shoulders, instilling hope.

“Thank you both.” Serenity managed a wobbly smile. “Forgive me for burdening you. I would have much preferred to come here

today solely to visit your little Jessamine—Grandee has already pronounced her an angel.”

Tyree winked at his wife, and Madelaine led Serenity out of the shop, leaving him to finish the bull’s-eye window frame in focused solitude.

“Jessa is indeed a sweet child, and you are no burden, Serenity,” Madelaine insisted as they crossed the courtyard back to the townhouse. “I know you want to do all you can for Amos, and you may trust Tyree will consider the best course for your brother. I will see that he understands how important it is to you. For now, let’s have some tea, sit by the fire, and you can hold Jessa for an hour or more, if you like.”

“Grandee sent along a gift for her. Amos has it in his pock—” Serenity halted before stepping over the threshold into the front room, observing a poignant tableau.

Asher knelt on one side of the cradle, Amos on the other, the wide-eyed baby girl basking in their undivided attention. Amos held an antique gold sovereign, which little Jessa reached for with perfectly formed fingers.

After kissing his infant sister’s forehead, Asher scurried past Serenity when Madelaine quietly bade him back to the shop where his father waited. There was woodworking to be done.

Amos hadn’t looked up when Serenity and Madelaine returned. His adoring attention remained unwaveringly on the little girl. “She is so very small. But she is strong. Watch.” With a hint of laughter, he held out his finger and Jessa grasped it tight. When he held the sovereign coin just beyond her reach, she gurgled, following Grandee’s shiny heirloom with her bright eyes.

Mimicking Asher, Amos leaned over the cradle’s side and placed another kiss on the baby’s downy-soft brow. Jessa cooed, eyes intent on Amos’s smiling face. Her tiny hand reached forth to touch his cheek. From the look of tender wonder in his eyes, it was evident in that moment Jessa had captured Amos’s heart.