

SCATTERWOOD

Being the Violent History of
CALUMNY SPINKS,
The Notorious White-skinned Maroon

PIERS ALEXANDER



Tenderfoot



PROLOGUE

The Esperance

Twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth days of March

Seven years' servitude. In all that time, to be another man's possession. To speak humbly, work like a mule, and never once breathe the warm wheatfield scent of my woman's hair.

I twisted the ivory thimble. The tiny carved battlements left dents on my fingertip.

As soon as I'd signed the deed of indenture, my new masters had bound me to a dangerous purpose. Damn their educated eyes; I'd have my liberty soon enough.

I had been confined to the lowest deck for ten miserable, unsleeping weeks. The hammocks, slung three high and three abreast on either side of the slippery gangway, were so tightly packed that one man's sickness would spray his neighbours as well as the poor fellow lying below.

This was worse than the Hell I'd once believed in. The sea pounded at the timbers without relent, day and night; there was scarcely a moment when there was no whimpering, puking or praying. We only knew if it was day or night when we were hustled up the ladders for our daily hour on deck.

Our quarters were so full that men took turns to sleep on hammocks. The fellows who were too weak to fight

for them were left to lie on the foul floor. After the first storm, we found their bodies huddled against the bulkheads, some unmoving.

I learned how to pass the time by sleeping, how to lie down for half a day. How to hold my piss, how to ignore my hunger, how to swing with the violent movement of the ship; how to spend every moment among strangers without learning to care for them.

There was little else to do but think on my troubles, and curse myself for making them.

Another storm was building.

I had no prayers to speak. I put the thimble back in my pocket for safety, brushing the little picture that nestled there: of Emilia de Corvis' plantation, nestling among glowering blue mountains. I had kept it for three years, dreaming of coming to the New World, but not like this. Not as a chattel.

The ship's belly struck the waves with a cannon-fire roar. My hammock reared, and began to swing so hard that my shoulders bumped the beam above. The bodies of my neighbours thudded onto wood as they fell from their beds, and the air grew vile with seasick sputters.

Further down the deck, the mules began to screech and kick their stalls.

Shadows danced madly. An oil lamp swung off its hook and burst on the deck, flaring into a blaze that was quickly suffocated by a sailor. The man below me began to jabber, kicking up as if he feared I would fall and crush him.

The lanterns were snuffed out for safety, and men held onto each other in the wet darkness. One of the eldest cried out for his mother, his voice weakening as the storm grew fiercer.

We carried his body up on deck the next day. The ship's store of sailcloth had been used up on the eight men who'd died before him, so his stiff carcass was not given a shroud. We dropped it overboard without even a prayer. He floated for a brief moment, then was snatched under in a black swirl.

The ship's crew were well-armed, since many of us indentured were thieves and criminals who'd signed a bond to escape gaol or the noose. Some had been deceived by smooth-tongued recruiting agents for the colonies; others claimed to have been taken by "spirits", men who would kidnap for coin.

Fully half our number were raw-skinned Irish farm lads. These fellows were all volunteers who'd had enough of tilling a landlord's field, and thought seven years a small price to pay for land of their own.

Richard Collingwood was standing in front of the cabin under the main deck, watching me. He ran his thick fingers through his hair and looked up. The air was softer now, carrying flights of seabirds from the islands that smudged the horizon. We were in the Caribbean.

"You," he called, beckoning me over. I went slowly through the throng of indentured men and followed him inside.

Closing the door, Collingwood's shadow hulked about the room. He seemed to press up against the rafters and

suck the daylight from the cabin windows; but my spirits lifted to see my only friend, Ty Pettit, sitting in a heavy wheelback chair, his ebony wool waistcoat buttoned despite the heat. Before him was a sheaf of papers, topmost a map showing a tangle of streets. Ty was drawing arrows on the map, fireworks bursting from four huge buildings into the smaller houses.

Collingwood grunted and pushed me towards the middle of the cabin.

“Ty – thank God,” I said. “Mister Collingwood, may I speak to Master Pettit alone?”

“You may not,” replied Collingwood. Ty brushed the raven’s wing of hair from his pale forehead. His hands and shoulders were too big for his frame.

“I am bound to a mission, sir,” I said at last, “of which I know nothing. I for one do not believe that ignorance is the path to success – I hope that Master Pettit might tell me what I will need to do.”

Collingwood stared at Ty, who took a heavy object from under the papers and slowly stood up. I held out my hand.

“Master Secretary,” he said coldly, advancing. Collingwood seized my arms and held them tightly behind me. Before I could speak, Ty swung his fist. It glistened for an instant, and then a cold weight struck me just below the eye. My head snapped back. Ty hit me again. Gold filled my sight.