



*Who knoweth whether
thou art come to the kingdom
for such a time as this?'*

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Susan McGeown:**

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Windermere Plantation

By Susan McGeown



www.susanmcgeown.com

Published by Faith Inspired Books
3 Kathleen Place, Bridgewater, New Jersey 08807
www.FaithInspiredBooks.com

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PRINT:

ISBN-10: 0990316815

ISBN-13: 978-0-9903168-1-7

EBOOK:

ISBN-10: 0990316858

ISBN-13: 978-0-9903168-5-5

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To God's Warrior Women

who despite the trials, tribulations, chaos and calamity of life
still strive daily to:

overcome the past and embrace the future,

obey God's still small voice,

depend on God's promises, and

commit to following God's call.

*For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love,
and self-discipline. 2 Timothy 1:7*

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Cast of Characters

The Great House

- Mena Westwood - Plantation teacher
- Mrs. Moira Wagner - Head housekeeper
- Mr. Walter Wagner – Butler
- Jessie Lynn - First floor head maid
- Mary Jean - Second floor head maid, sister to Silent Joe
- Dahlia – Head cook
- John Paul – Kitchen helper
- Peach – Kitchen peeler
- Fancy May – Kitchen pastry girl

Field Workers

- Graham Rhyder - Plantation Manager
- Isaac & Rachel Freeman Family:
 - Isaac Freeman – Plantation foreman
 - Rachel - Isaac's wife, field worker
- 6 children, listed oldest to youngest
 - Elizabeth
 - Abigail
 - Rebecca
 - Deborah
 - Ruth
 - Little Mary
- Big Mary – Plantation worker
- Billy – Worker in the mill
- Karl Jakeman - Stable master
- Elijah Hayden - Head gardener
- Old Maisy – Old black woman
- Silent Joe – Young black man who does not speak, brother to Mary Jean
- Winston – Experienced field worker, Isaac's brother
- Willie – Plantation striker
- Simon – Plantation worker

- Ebony – Field worker
- Ivy - Young woman dismissed from Windermere when Mr. Topher was first employed as solicitor about ten years ago.

Mena's "Harvest Children"

- Crybaby James
- Mae
- Angeline
- Stinky Celia
- Biter Joe
- Whiny Louise,
- Wanderin' Sammie
- Will
- Li'l Winston – Son of Winston

Additional Barbados Personalities

- Mr. Nelson Topher, Esq. - Plantation solicitor
- Audrey Topher - Mr. Topher's second wife
- Lord Phillip Walcott - Owner of the 627 acre Forster Hall Plantation
- Lady Maureen Walcott – Fourth wife of Lord Phillip Walcott
- Phillip Elias Walcott - Infant son of Lord Phillip and Lady Maureen
- Sir Alan Russell – Owner of 125 acre Foursquare Plantation

The Windermere Family

(Resides primarily in London)

- Lord Windermere - Alexander Malcolm St. James, Marquis of Windermere, Earl of Lindsay
- Lady Windermere - Lucinda, Marchioness of Windermere

- Lord Gabriel Martin Windermere – Eldest child and only son of Lord Alexander Malcolm Windermere.
- Lady Wilhelmina Constance Westwood Windermere – Only daughter of Lord & Lady Windermere

England:

- Lady Evangeline Kipling – Mena's friend

Graham Rhyder Family

- Dancer – Graham's horse
- Bridget – Graham's dead mother
- Fiona – Graham's dead wife

Friendship Townspeople

- Reverend Samuels – Friendship's minister
- Doctor Thomas Franklin – Friendship's doctor
- Widow Pamela Smitton - Townsperson

Quakers

- Friend Nathaniel – aka Nate
- Friend Sylvia
- Friend William
- Friend Thomas



“One day,” she said with a voice filled with such longing it threatened to consume her, “I’ll leave all this and become a completely different person.”

“But where would you go?” her imaginary friend asked.

“Anywhere but here,” she answered in a voice choked with tears.

Da longer yuh live, da more yuh bear.

Chapter One

“Where the hell have you been, Isaac?” Graham shouted. “I know I’m a miracle worker here on this plantation but I certainly can’t be in two places at once. There’s been machine trouble at the mill that’s had me sweating and cursing for the past hour, and God knows what’s going on out in the fields with no supervision. You’re as much help as Big Mary is at harvest time.”

“I’s just got back from da dock, Boss, an’ came as soon as I could.”

“What fool errand did that witch send you on this time? I swear it makes no sense that you’re supposed to drop everything and run and do the House’s bidding when it’s *our labor* that keeps them in the style they so firmly believe they deserve.”

“I’s sent ta pick up da new teacher – Miss Mena. She’s mighty fine, Boss. Yuh’s gonna like her fo’ sure.”

Graham glanced at Isaac and saw the wide grin splitting his coal black face. “Is that so, Isaac? Since when have I taken an interest in any female since I’ve been here?” *All four years, five months, and twenty five days...*

Isaac was not deterred. “Yuh’s just choosy, Boss. I’s not fooled. Yuh knows dat qual-it-ee is worth da wait. And dat’s what yuh been doin’ ... waitin’.” Graham shook his head as he adjusted the straps of Dancer’s saddle, and Isaac continued baiting him, “Rachel, she says yuh needs a fem-ee-nine touch in yuhr life. I got a feelin’ dat dis Miss Mena is gonna be it.”

That brought Graham to a halt. “And what brought Rachel to her conclusion?”

Isaac attempted not to laugh, but failed. “I’s believe it has somethin’ ta do with da fancy bit of stitchin’ yuh did on yuhr pants da other day, Boss. Even I cud see dat was some sorry work.”

Swinging easily up into the saddle, Graham glared down at his still grinning foreman’s face. “It would seem that if Rachel has enough time to examine the quality of my sewing skills and make comments on them, then perhaps she has too much free time on her hands. You’d think between dealing with you, five wild little girls and one on the way, not to mention working full time in the field, she’d have no time to check out my needlework.” He looked pointedly at Isaac. “Say, is she interested in darning some socks for me? If she doesn’t like my fine needle work she’d be horrified with my darning abilities.”

“Ah, Boss, yuh knows Rachel would be happy ta take care of yuhr needs. She may be my wife but she does love yuh somethin’ fierce jus’ da same.” Isaac spoke the truth and the irony of it wasn’t lost on either man.

“How’s she feeling, Isaac? I swear, seeing her out in the fields with her enormous belly ...”

“She’s right fine, Boss. Keeps me an’ da girls in line wit’ jus’ a look.”

“I’ve got to learn her secret. She’s got to have a big switch somewhere close by that she uses to keep all of you behaving.”

Isaac smiled. “When yuh loves someone, yuh’s quick ta do what needs ta be done.”

Adjusting his hat to shield his eyes from the bright morning sun, Graham chose to ignore that comment but Isaac continued, “And speakin’ of love, boss, dat new teacher – Miss Mena Westwood ...”

Graham interrupted brusquely, “You’re better at the mechanics than I am, Isaac. Check over what I did to get things moving again – I’m sure you’ll see what I’ve tinkered with. Good thing we decided to do some test runs what with harvest time breathing heavy down our necks.”

Both men were silent for a moment, lost in thought. Harvest Time four nonstop, back-breaking months – came in February and ended in May. It was an endless grind of work during which every able bodied individual – man, woman, and child – worked to harvest the almighty sugar cane. Harvest Time was followed by Hard Times, the remaining eight months of the year when work was scarce and threatened everything else necessary to survive. During Hard Times – especially now during late December - Harvest Time couldn’t come soon enough for most folks. Starvation or death by labor ... sometimes there was little distinction as to which was worse.

“Ask Billy if you need any clarification about what I did,” Graham told Isaac. “He hovered over me like a terrified mother hen the moment he realized I was going to start fiddling with his precious machinery rather than you.”

“T’s get right on dat, Boss. An’ yuh’s to stop at da House befo’ yuh head to da fields.” Isaac had saved that lousy piece of news for last, knowing full well the reaction it would bring.

“What the—, Dammit! For what good reason?! First your time is wasted with a fool’s errand, and now mine. I’ve not been in the fields yet this morning! I don’t have time for this.”

“Cook’s made a fresh batch o’ apple cakes ta take da edge off. Maybe dat will help. An’ yuh maybe can catch a glimpse of dat pretty new gal dat just came — ‘member her name is Miss Mena. Maybe, Boss, if yuh didn’t rile Missus Wagner as much as yuh see fit ta do she wouldn’t see fit ta lord it over yuh as much as she does. My Rachel says—,”

Isaac’s ramblings were left to the wind as Graham galloped off towards the house in a spray of dust and rocks. The day he bowed to that stuck up, self-righteous, pig-headed witch of a woman was the day they could put him in the box and bury him. There was a constant battle between the two of them over who had the superior hand on Windermere Plantation. Had Lord Windermere been in residence for even part of the year, the hierarchy — those groups he and Mrs. Wagner represented — could report directly to him and be firmly in place. But Lord Windermere was busy making his new fortune in the Americas and Graham had never even laid eyes on the man. Hired by Lord Windermere’s solicitor, Mr. Nelson Topher, Graham had been charged with running the entire farming and production aspect of the plantation — the *money-making part* of the plantation, Graham always felt compelled to point out. He met monthly with Mr. Topher to provide his report, receive any specific instructions, and collect his pay. Unfortunately, Mrs. Wagner was held to a similar reporting structure with her own significant list of responsibilities, which included the overseeing of the Great House and all accounts. For those who lived on Windermere plantation, it was Mrs. Wagner who wielded the power over living conditions, food, clothing, and, aside from Graham, wages. No one in their right mind, besides Graham of course, had the temerity to cross the woman with anything but the utmost respect and caution. *Money is king.*

Only once had Graham questioned the Windermere Plantation's hierarchical structure which, he had pointed out, caused such a divisive power struggle. "Lord Windermere has always been a cautious businessman," Mr. Topher had intoned as he'd peered pointedly at Graham over his spectacles. "He believes that division of power is essential to ensure honesty and integrity amongst employees. He is a wise man who trusts no one: not family, not friends, not employees. Because of that, he is wealthy *and* powerful." The implication was that should Graham have issues with the way the plantation was being run, it was a glaring black mark against his honesty and integrity. And, having arrived with a significant black mark before he'd even had a chance to prove himself simply by the fact of who he was and where he'd come from, Graham knew that wisdom favored his silence and capitulation.

His horse, Dancer, skidded to a halt and had his head in the water trough before Graham had made it to the front door. Striding through the front vestibule over the polished mahogany floors, Graham initiated power struggle number one. He was supposed to enter the house only through the back kitchen servant's entrance. The sharp staccato of his boot heels sounded like small explosions as he tramped through the long main hallway towards the back of the house where Mrs. Wagner's small office was located. Without bothering to knock (power struggle number two), Graham pushed open the door. "Just what the hell do you need to speak to me about that is more important than me seeing to my duties in the field?"

The startled female gasp Graham heard was the first clue that Mrs. Wagner was not alone. Mrs. Wagner didn't gasp. Hell, she didn't cry, didn't raise her voice ... Graham seriously doubted whether the woman even had a beating heart. And she would never give him the satisfaction of reacting to his confrontational behavior. "Ah, here he is, Miss Westbrook. We will maintain proper etiquette even if he is unable to, shall we

not? Ms. Mena Westbrook, may I introduce to you our field overseer, Mr. Graham Rhyder?” Her brief glance acknowledged to Graham her counter attack; his proper title was Manager, not merely a field overseer.

The young woman stood and hesitantly extended her white gloved hand, seemingly oblivious to the tension swirling around her. “Mr. Rhyder, sir. How do you do?”

Belatedly, Graham removed his hat, casting a piercing glance at Mrs. Wagner, who was not the intended recipient of this sudden flash of manners. The young woman was surprisingly tall, almost looking him directly in the eye with brown hair, carefully styled, and a flawless, fair complexion that looked to have never felt direct sunlight. He bowed his head briefly, “Miss Westbrook. Welcome to Windermere Plantation.” He glanced at her extended hand and then up into her bright, green eyes. What was she expecting? Was he supposed to shake it like a man or kiss it like they were at some fancy ball? He chose to do neither and watched as she quickly lowered her hand.

“Mr. Rhyder,” she gave him a shy, tentative smile, “thank you for your welcome.”

Done with the niceties, Graham turned to Mrs. Wagner. “Why am I here?” he asked bluntly. “I’ve got things to do.”
And well you know it.

Mrs. Wagner adjusted papers on her desk, straightened the cuffs of her blouse, stood, smoothed her skirt, and walked around her desk before making eye contact with Graham. “Miss Westbrook has been hired to begin a school here on the plantation and would like to discuss her needs with you.”

“And it had to be discussed *now*?” Graham glanced quickly at Miss Westbrook’s puzzled expression before he turned to glare at Mrs. Wagner.

“I ju-” Miss Westbrook stammered, but Mrs. Wagner’s cool, commanding voice overrode her.

“Miss Westbrook’s time is no less valuable than yours, Mr. Rhyder.” Counter attack number two as this was patently untrue. “She needs to begin making preparations so that she can see to her responsibilities as soon as possible. I was well aware that you spent your entire morning away from the fields and as such saw no reason not to take advantage of your close proximity.”

She managed to make it sound like he’d been sitting under a palm all morning drinking rum and playing cards rather than sweating, straining and knee deep in muck trying to repair one of the main presses. Dialogue between he and Moira Wagner was a challenge within a challenge that danced along the edges of propriety with their repeated attempts to push the other over the edge of sanity and reason. The ultimate goal was to cause the other to say or do something that would cost him or her their employment. Breathing deeply to calm himself, he carefully placed his hat on his head and turned to the young woman standing mutely between two obvious adversaries. “Miss Westbrook, I know you must have numerous things to do in order to get settled seeing as this is your first day here at Windermere. As I have demanding responsibilities that need to be seen to immediately, would it be possible for us to have this conversation at dinner this evening? I don’t know if Mrs. Wagner has explained her required eating arrangements here at Windermere.”

Miss Westbrook nodded and recited, “The head staff dresses for dinner at six and eats together.”

“Dresses for dinner?” Graham shook his head in disgust and gave Mrs. Wagner a pointed look before responding. “So would it be convenient to discuss your needs at that time?”

“Oh, er, um, yes, yes that would be fine. I still have all my unpacking to do and Mr. Topher wishes to meet with me as well.”

“Fine. Until six then.” He was gone before Mrs. Wagner could launch counter attack number three.



Mr. Nelson Topher, the plantation’s solicitor, took his job very seriously. Commandeering the library, he meticulously set up shop with quills and inkwells, file folders and ledger books. Mena fought a smile as she sat across from him as he shuffled through his papers preparing to meet with her; he looked a lot like how she had imagined Bob Cratchit to have looked in Charles Dickens wonderful story *A Christmas Carol*.

“Now, Miss ... Westwood, we will begin with the ordinary constraints of your employment here at Windermere. You are expected to put in a full day, meaning from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m., with an hour allowed for lunch Monday through Saturday. Sunday is your day, although your mornings will be taken up with church attendance. Your wages of £70 a year are more than generous as they include both room and board. You will be expected to dress suitably; however. No uniforms will be provided.” Mr. Topher removed his glasses and massaged the bridge of his nose. Once his glasses were back in place, he took a moment to study her from across the small table upon which all of his papers were carefully laid out. “You should understand that your salary is commensurate on *progress*, Miss Westwood. This position is *not a handout*.”

“Why, I’m not requesting one, Sir,” Mena felt compelled to respond. “I have every intention of working diligently to educate young and old alike. I’ve come well prepared and see no reason why I should fail.”

“Miss Westwood,” Mr. Topher sighed, speaking to her almost as if she were learning impaired, “you are stepping into a situation that has many, many volatile situations to which you are ill prepared to recognize or even avoid. This beautiful land of Barbados has been a world unto itself for well over 250 years, and despite your evident education and breeding in England I fear you are unprepared for the reality of life here.”

“I don’t understand what you are trying to tell me, Mr. Topher. Could I encourage you to speak plainly?”

“The society of Windermere is very much like every plantation society here on the island and this society is further reflected in the small towns and large cities. There is a hierarchy, so to speak, that the education you are proposing will severely disrupt.”

“Sir, the slaves have been free for almost twenty years now. Surely everyone understands *this reality* and must recognize that education not only helps the individual but society as a whole.”

Mr. Topher gave Mena a wan smile; her ignorance apparently amusing him slightly. “Surely you must know *true reality* is not that simple nor is it so cut and dried! Twenty years compared to two hundred means very little to families of both the slave and the master, Miss Westwood. Freedom is an illusion that no one enjoys. If you do not recognize that now, you will very shortly during your time here. Freed blacks are worse off now with their precious freedom than they were as slaves to say nothing of the poor bakros who -”

“Poor bakros?”

“Hierarchy, Miss Westwood, societal hierarchy,” Mr. Topher enunciated crisply. “Obviously book learning only goes so far and I’m not paid to explain the nuances of life at the very bottom rung of society. What you need to understand, however,

because you will face this *immediately* in your quest to improve society here in Barbados and in particular here at Windermere, is that the freed slaves' struggle now is worse than ever. They live a hand-to-mouth existence no longer cared for by masters who used to provide food, clothing, housing, and medical care. The wages they earn, should they manage to find work, keep them teetering literally on the edge of life and death; so minimal that within a family every single member, from the moment they can walk and understand orders, are required to work to help keep the family alive. The elite, the plantocracy, have not ceded defeat in this battle of societal stratification, oh no! They have merely renamed the game and added a few more rules to ensure that they maintain their wealth, their superiority, and their place at the top of society.

“Suddenly you arrive; the why and how cloaked in some mystery.” At Mena’s start, he nodded. “Do not fret, Miss Westwood, all your papers are in order and you come with a fine recommendation from,” he looked down and tapped the paper in front of him, “Lady Evangeline Kipling, from a most prestigious family in London, I note. But I am not an ignorant man, Miss Westwood. It makes no sense to me that out of the blue a teacher has been employed to come here to Windermere to set up a school with a private account specifically designated from which I am to draw and pay out your salary.” He shook his head and looked piercingly at her. “It’s most unusual indeed.”

Mena swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. “What are you accusing me of, sir?” His silent, judgmental perusal reminded her of Father and she felt the old anger spark to life. “Perhaps I am a thief, desperate to become wealthy and powerful on my abundant salary of £6.25 a month! Or perhaps you fear I am some righteous zealot here to encourage insurgence and take over the island with my army of freed, educated blacks?”

He was completely unruffled by her outburst. “Your letter comes *without* any authorization from Lord Windermere or his London solicitor, and it would be terribly remiss of me to overlook that omission. My lord’s absence from this property does not mean that procedures are not followed with utmost care, nor suitable caution waived.” He tapped Lady Kipling’s letter again, “merely by speaking the name of a family highly respected by Polite Society. I must account for my job performance just as everyone else does, Miss Westwood, which is why I will provide full disclosure regarding your presence here in my next report to Lord Windermere along with all the information – that we have and that we lack – regarding your employment. Lord Windermere would expect nothing less of me.

“As the plantation’s solicitor, I make every effort to visit here once a month, usually during the final week. I meet with Mrs. Wagner who reports on the house accounts and Mr. Rhyder who reports on the field accounts. In addition, until further instructions from Lord Windermere or his London solicitor, I will meet with you. In order to receive your pay, you will provide me with a written report of your progress. In your report you should include your successes as well as your failures as well as a list of any required necessities.” Mr. Topher began to gather up his papers, carefully placing everything in a small leather bound trunk, summarily ending their meeting. Suddenly he stopped and added, “In addition, I will ask you to provide observations regarding both Mrs. Wagner’s and Mr. Rhyder’s performance.”

“To what end?” Mena asked. “Why would you be interested in my observations regarding the plantation’s housekeeper and manager?”

He shrugged, his glance revealing a shrewd intelligence her initial impression had completely overlooked. “There’s a

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saying on the island that I've always liked and have subscribed to with great success. *Mo' eyes, bettah sight.* Why wouldn't I want your observation? If you are honest and thorough, my knowledge of the plantation – and my continued effectiveness in my capacity as legal overseer of Windermere - can only benefit.”



Her friend's snort of derision was abrupt and loud; something that would never be heard in Polite Society. "Listen carefully as you'll never meet another person more honest and plain spoken than I. There is no such thing as the freedom you're dreaming of! Look around you. Can you find one person that is honestly free to do whatever he or she wishes with no obligations? The freedom that you're longing for is a fabricated illusion; a trick of the mind, and the sooner you understand that, the sooner you can move forward with your life."

"What you need to do is to decide to whom you are going to give your allegiance. A wise decision brings a personal independence you haven't even considered! I chose to give my allegiance to God and trust that He will care for me in all things. I found that once you have made that decision, then finding your direction in life becomes purposeful and empowered. I'm not free; I'm chosen. I'm not frightened, I'm invincible. I'm not broken, I'm transformed."

Ev'ry disappointment is a blessing.

Chapter Two

Her room was larger than she had expected, with a bed, dresser, small desk, bookshelf and wash stand. After opening one of the two windows, a fresh, strong ocean breeze swept into the room providing Mena with a welcome relief to the heat and stuffiness.

Mrs. Wagner's behavior had been disappointing and Mr. Topher's meeting was worse than anything she had dreaded. The last thing Mena needed was to draw undue attention to herself by becoming involved with conflict and drama here at Windermere. Why couldn't she just be allowed to perform her duties? She'd traveled thousands of miles and had been determined to remain separate and apart from anything resembling trouble. Yet within her first day of arriving she'd somehow become embroiled in the power struggle between the manager and the housekeeper. Despite working diligently to not engage in Mrs. Wagner's pointed jabs prior to Mr. Rhyder's arrival, she had nonetheless been forced to listen to a steady litany of derogatory innuendoes regarding everything from the man's job performance to the accident of his apparently ignominious birth. His abrupt appearance and departure had done nothing to improve Mrs. Wagner's opinion of him.

Stepping out of her office at the conclusion of their first meeting, Mrs. Wagner had unhooked the ring of keys from her

belt and carefully locked her office door. She had an ageless quality about her: her behavior made her seem elderly to the point of stodgy, while her appearance was that of a much younger woman. “Windermere Plantation has a rich, vibrant history that *most* of us are proud to be a part of. Wagners have been proudly serving at Windermere for almost one hundred and fifty years and are as much a part of this place as Lord and Lady Windermere.”

“Is that so?” Mena had asked politely.

Walking briskly down the hall, Mrs. Wagner nodded. “Absolutely. As his Lordship and her Ladyship have not set foot on Bajan land for almost twenty years, Mr. Wagner and I have taken upon ourselves to treat this beautiful place as if it were ours. *We take great pride* in its reputation, the fine history it claims, and the success of its harvests, and we are actively engaged in continuing this great legacy. Mr. Wagner and I do not tolerate insubordination, slacking, or disrespect of any kind. *Appearance is everything* and under no circumstances will anything but the best be expected or accepted from each and every employee.” Mrs. Wagner had stopped and looked at Mena pointedly. “That includes *you*, Miss Westwood. Your behavior and your performance will reflect directly upon Windermere.

“Which brings us back to the topic of Mr. Rhyder. He continues to be employed here at Windermere because no one, as of yet, has taken the time to examine the *true character* of the man. As you have already seen, he is irreverent, confrontational and disrespectful of his betters, and you would do well to remember to keep a distance from that man, Miss Westwood. Reputations are hard to establish but easy to lose, and you certainly do not want his soiled history to sully yours.” Mena was puzzled by this lengthy speech. What did the woman think? That she was going to somehow throw her lot in with this man? Was Mrs. Wagner implying that Mena’s dedication to her job

extended only until she could find herself a husband? Little did Mrs. Wagner know that had she wanted to marry, she never would have left home.

As for Mr. Rhyder, without even opening her mouth Mena had incurred the man's impatience. It had been purely Mrs. Wagner's decision to request his immediate assistance in getting her school started and at her first opportunity this evening, Mena planned to release him from any responsibilities. His barely controlled disdain towards even the most basic of civilities made the prospect of working with him nothing she wished to even consider.

Mena was still reeling from those encounters. Mr. Topher's lecture had managed to outline not only her ignorance of Barbados' history and society but her idiocy of attempting to bring help and hope to an area so obviously in need. Surprisingly, Mena had been unfazed with the questioning of her intellectual abilities; it was a cross all educated women regularly bore in silence. (The silence rooted in the wisdom of knowing when to keep one's mouth shut.)

No, it was the challenging of her integrity...and his accurate judgment of the situation that had terrified her. It had not occurred to her as she had done all her preparation and planning to come to Barbados that the thoroughness of one determined individual could undermine everything so quickly.

She bit her lip, recalling the moment she had decided to travel to Barbados and become a teacher. Evangeline had suggested Windermere ... *insisted* on it actually. Now that she was here, there was no doubt in her mind that God had directed her to this very spot. There would have been no one in her circle of family who would have applauded or encouraged her – had she told anyone what she was planning to do. Evangeline had been the only person to whom she could trust. How incredible that her opportunity for escape had been provided by

the very arena from which she sought to flee? How terrifying that all her carefully laid plans would most probably be destroyed in a matter of months by one thorough solicitor determined to ‘do his job with the utmost care and caution?’ Mena sighed. Mere months instead of an open, expansive future were not what she had imagined for her time in Barbados.

Mena sighed. Well, she would do what she found the utmost joy and peace in: focus positively on the future, trust that God was in control, and put one foot firmly in front of the other. Her entire life had been a lesson in survival and she should expect nothing less here in Barbados. Whether she was ill prepared or not, she would continue along this course that she felt called to before she was dragged ... kicking and screaming ... back to the life her parents were determined to force on her. For there was no doubt in her mind that when and if Lord Windermere learned of her presence at the plantation, that was exactly what would happen.

Dinner – at six sharp - was the oddest experience Mena had ever had. Seated around the large formal dining table, Mrs. Wagner at the head and Mr. Wagner (the house’s butler) at the foot were herself, Mr. Topher, Jessie Lynn (the first floor head maid), Mary Jean (the second floor head maid), Karl (the stable master), Elijah (the head gardener) and one empty chair. While only Mr. and Mrs. Wagner, Mr. Topher and Mena had managed to formally dress for dinner, most of the others had made significant efforts to appear presentable. Jessie Lynn and Mary Jean had put on fresh, clean, starched aprons and caps while Karl and Elijah sported wet cuffs and collars (as well as meticulously combed hair) from their obvious attempts to wash hands and face.

Although not being a full day present at Windermere, Mena waited with baited breath for Mr. Rhyder’s arrival, knowing that his presence would alter the entire mood of the

meal. He did not disappoint. He arrived six minutes late (pointed out immediately by Mrs. Wagner), hands and face clean and his black hair wet and tousled from an obvious dip in the horse trough. Refusing to apologize for his lateness, he hung his hat on the back of his chair, declined to bow his head for grace, and refrained from any of the awkward conversation which Mrs. Wagner presided over as he methodically worked through the food on his plate.

Mena cast sidelong glances at him as he sat directly across from her and had to admit, all things considered, that he had acceptable table manners once seated. On one occasion, he caught her glancing at him and ever so slightly inclined his head; she was sure she blushed. Most of Mrs. Wagner's questions focused around Mena. As the meal progressed, she entertained them with a detailed description of her voyage, describing the beauty and grandeur of the wild Atlantic ocean, and had them all chuckling at some of the rather colorful characters – both passengers and ship employees – whom she had encountered along the way.

Eventually, conversation veered to Mena's needs. Mrs. Wagner repeatedly tried to circumvent Mr. Rhyder by asking questions of other staff members around the table, but it was always Mr. Rhyder who gave the final, albeit brief, response. Karl, the stable master, was uncertain as to whether the main trail out to the fields would be suitable for a horse-and-buggy tour of the plantation that Mrs. Wagner wished Isaac to provide to Mena. Per Mr. Rhyder, it most definitely was not. Elijah, the head gardener, was unable to predict the exact day for the start of the sugar cane harvest. Per Mr. Rhyder, it would commence in early February *just as it did every year*. Miss Westwood was an accomplished horsewoman, and Karl was asked if there was a suitable horse for her to use during her time with them. Per Mr. Rhyder, once harvest time commenced there would be absolutely no horses to spare for casual use. Even Mr. Topher,

when asked about the number of young children presently residing on the plantation, pointed out that Mr. Rhyder would be better prepared to give an accurate answer. Time and again as the meal progressed, conversation would stop for a brief moment as Mr. Rhyder paused to finish whatever mouthful he was working on to pointedly look at Mrs. Wagner, and provide a brief one or two word answer.

As conversation at the table unfolded, Mena observed a very interesting dynamic: while making every effort to be respectful to Mrs. Wagner, most people around the table clearly recognized Mr. Rhyder as their superior. Mena was certain that while everyone most assuredly knew the answer to every question, in almost every case they skillfully deferred the final answer to Mr. Rhyder. Mena was certain that Mrs. Wagner knew this as well.

Mena suspected that it was a game played regularly in which a majority of those seated were unwilling, captive participants. Observing Mr. Topher as he worked his way through a dinner of roast beef, sweet potatoes and green beans soaked in gravy, he on a number of occasions seemed to purposely ask questions that reinitiated the odd dynamic.

Jessie Lynn and Mary Jean were not unaffected by Mr. Rhyder's presence at the table. They made numerous ineffectual attempts to draw him into conversation and, when that failed, deigned to smile prettily and invitingly whenever he should happen to glance their way, which he patently and completely ignored.

Only Mr. Wagner seemed completely oblivious to the dynamics around the table, wordlessly working through his meal. Oddly, even Mrs. Wagner seemed disinclined to speak with her husband or attempt to draw him into conversation.

As dessert was cleared, Mr. Rhyder wiped his mouth on his linen napkin, folded it beside his plate, and addressed Mena directly for the first time. "Would it be convenient to discuss your specific needs at this time, Miss Westwood?" Both Jessie Lynn and Mary Jean turned to Mena, mouths open in wordless shock. At last, it would seem the game of dinner had made a new, shocking twist that even they had never witnessed heretofore.

Folding her napkin and making every effort to appear calm and self-assured (which she most assuredly was not) Mena answered politely, "Yes, thank you, Mr. Rhyder, now would be most convenient."

Mena could feel the stares boring into her back, through Mr. Rhyder who followed silently behind her as they proceeded out of the dining room. When Mena hesitated, Mr. Rhyder gestured to her left, indicating that she should proceed out the front door. "The evening breeze is always refreshing at this time of night, Miss Westwood," he explained, and pulling a thin cheroot from his breast pocket, he said with not a little bit of humor, "and I would enjoy my one vice without having to listen to Mrs. Wagner's lectures on the horrors of cigar smoke in the house."

Light from the interior spilled out onto the porch, and once again Mr. Rhyder indicated two large chairs to their left. "Do you mind?" He held the cheroot in his mouth and a match in his hand.

When she shook her head, he set about lighting his cigar. Mena closed her eyes as the sweet smell of the tobacco elicited memories of Father and her home so far away. On its own, the smell was rather pleasant, although had it been coupled with alcohol she would have run screaming into the night. It was not the first time memories overwhelmed her, nor would it be the last. Some would haunt her forever, while others were forcibly

set aside by sheer force of will. She had made herself come to terms with the reality of her existence on the long ocean voyage, and knew she would need to continue to remind herself to not look back but instead gaze with gritty determination into the future. She had no people she truly missed – and a few whose absence finally allowed her to sleep in peace. Home had never been a place of promise, and for many years had been nothing more than a prison. Whether she was too weak to face her future responsibilities or too strong-willed to respect the decisions of those in authority over her (both criticisms leveled out her different times by her parents), Mena had left all she knew to travel here to Barbados and was determined to make the most of it.

“You’re awfully silent for a woman. Now that’s a pleasant surprise,” Mr. Rhyder observed as he puffed away contentedly, staring off into the dark night. The breeze stirred the towering mahogany trees above them and rattled the leaves of the sugar cane off in the distance.

“Is it an unconscious behavior that makes you offend at every opportunity or do you intentionally work at it?” She shocked herself with the bold, confrontational question.

He chuckled, not at all put off by her rudeness. “Ah, there we go. I’ve primed the pump so to speak. Knew you had a tongue in your head.” He turned to study her in the dim light. “And, just maybe, a brain in your head as well.”

Whatever game he was attempting to play with her Mena would have none of it. “Please let us get to the business at hand. I’ve been employed to teach any and all who are interested to read and write: young and old. I require a building as well as a set time, preferably five to six days a week, in which to do this. In addition, I’d like your support and encouragement as I try to enlist those in need to take advantage of this opportunity. Other than these few things, I release you from any obligations Mrs.

Wagner seemed to imply you have towards me and my position here.”

He gave her a pointed look. “I take it you’ve had this identical conversation with Mrs. Wagner this afternoon.”

“Ah, not yet. But I will, Mr. Rhyder, rest assured. The house employees will be just as welcome as the field employees to the benefits of an education.”

“And you’re confident you will be successful in both arenas.” His tone told her that he did not share in this belief.

Mena turned to look at him. She respected a man who was brave enough to speak his mind and converse with a woman as an equal – a rare and refreshing occurrence. Nothing annoyed her more than to have to battle false politeness and barely veiled innuendoes.

“I’d appreciate honesty, sir. Feel free to speak plainly.”

He smiled a slow, easy smile and then looked out into the night. Stretching out, he crossed his long legs, and took a deep draw on his cigar. Smoke curled round them as he drawled, “So, you want to teach the niggahs and such, is that it? All the poor unfortunates: young and old, black or white? Come all the way across the ocean, at the risk of life and limb, to impart your wisdom, education, and cultured expertise on these poor, ignorant savages. You plannin’ on savin’ their souls, too?” He’d continued to puff away on his cigar, never once looking in her direction.

It was her turn to chuckle. He had no idea that his insulting insinuations were nothing compared to her family’s. Or anyone else in the world from which she’d come. It was so much easier to deal with this immediately rather than having to beat around the bush endlessly. “You’ve stated my situation crudely but, I suppose, accurately.”

He turned then to look her directly in the eye. “Why?”

Ah, the question of her life. The one question that, despite numerous attempts, she had never been able to get anyone to comprehend. She had many answers.

Because I need to do this to avoid sinking forever into the darkness of despair.

Because I have always felt a call to teach, and it is the one place in my life where I consistently find joy.

Because nothing else presents the greatest challenge and offers the ultimate satisfaction of victory.

Because it is the one thing I can do that I know I can do well.

Because I believe God wants me to.

Each of these answers had never brought understanding and in the case of her family had only brought derision. Oh to be able to erase their caustic comments from her mind... She could not stand to hear Mr. Rhyder’s cutting comments and add them to her memory. She. Could. Not. She was starting fresh here in Barbados. A clean slate.

He was waiting for an answer patiently staring directly at her while she sifted through her thoughts. She enunciated her response clearly and concisely, buoyed by the unexplainable feeling that he was perhaps honestly interested in a sincere answer. Empowered by the reality that *she was here in Barbados, free, finally, at last*, she said, “Because I want to and there is no longer anything to stop me.”

Mr. Rhyder snorted a loud, rude sound that echoed across the porch. “Oh no! A crusader! God help us all!” He clutched his heart in dramatic fashion. “God save me from women who think they can change the world. Or even one sorry, hopeless individual for that matter! Well then, Miss Westwood, you’re more naïve than I feared you to be.” He

leaned in, the smell of hard working man and smooth cigar smoke filling Mena's nostrils. "*Wantin' don' mean gettin', child,*" he said in perfect black lingo.

Before she could respond, he continued. "You think that all the poor unfortunates here on Barbados are just going to fall at your feet in tremendous gratitude for your selfless commitment to their betterment?" Mena fought the urge to clap her hands over her ears and close her eyes tight to shut him out. "You think everyone's going to be thanking you and dancing a happy jig because you've finally arrived to save their sorry souls? Maybe you hope to fill their hungry bellies with fancy words and carefully formed letters. Maybe you think that getting them to speak the proper Queen's English will help people forget the color of their skin and the circumstances of their birth? Do you really think that you can give hope back when it was beaten out of them more than a hundred years ago? Do you think the Mrs. Wagners of this world are going to pat you on the back and say, 'Oh what a noble cause, how can I help you?' Who do you think you are," he ground out, "God?"

Mena, forgetting propriety and manners, hissed back, "I'm not here at Mrs. Wagner's pleasure, nor, for that matter, am I here for yours. I've been hired to do a job, and despite your fear at my naiveté I assure you that I am well aware of the daunting nature of my task. You can laugh at me, ridicule me, and even condemn me for my ignorance, but *I'm not quitting.*"

Not at all fazed by her outburst, he chuckled and shook his head. "That's what you say. I'll talk to you in a bit. Life here in," he paused to look away, but Mena caught a bleakness in his eyes that he was not quick enough to hide, "the paradise of Barbados has a way of beating down even the most passionate and committed souls."

Her back snapped straighter and her chin jutted out in defiance. "I am far stronger than I appear, Mr. Rhyder, and I

pray earnestly that will not be the case with me. My hopes and my dreams are really all I have left.”

He stood, ground his cigar out carefully on the bottom of his boot and tucked it back in his front shirt pocket. Looking down at her, he muttered in frustration, “Did *no one* in authority over you try to get you to see reason in the midst of this insanity?”

Mena stood so that she could look him almost eye to eye. One thing she’d learned was there was nothing a man hated more than when a woman who had the temerity to look him eye to eye in an argument. *Mind your manners, Mena! Know your place! Remember your breeding! Women are supposed to be demure, polite and soft spoken. You’ll never catch a man when you insist on trying to best one in a verbal exchange. Men don’t want a woman who thinks! Men want women who are quiet, submissive, and docile.* She took a step into Mr. Rhyder’s space, and even in the dim light she could see his eyebrows arch in surprise. Good. She was already making a point before she’d even opened her mouth. She spoke with a confidence that had begun to slip a bit over this chaotic first day, but she was rapidly recovering. “Authority is who you recognize as your superior, Mr. Rhyder. I’m very selective with that, although it hasn’t stopped people from trying to control me. Every person I know back home tried to get me to see reason in the midst of this insanity, Mr. Rhyder. And so far all failed miserably. If you think you’ve got the tenacity to match my determination, I invite you to get in line, but I’ll warn you: it’s a lengthy one. Don’t make the mistake of underestimating me or my commitment.

“I’m tired of people making assumptions about me because I’m ‘just a woman.’ I’m fed up with people telling me what I must and mustn’t do simply because it’s ‘the way it’s always done.’ And, I’m sick to death of having people tell me I can’t do something simply because in their opinion it’s

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impossible. I've travelled thousands of miles, willing to forsake everything I've ever known to have a fresh start here. I'll succeed or I'll fail, but I'm determined to do it in my own way." Turning on her heel, she marched back into the house and up the two long flights to her room before the tears began.



The low male laughter outside frightened him, and his whimpers brought Momma to the side of his pallet.

Sitting beside him on the floor, she brushed his hair out of his eyes and took his tiny hand in hers. "Hush now. Ye should be sleepin'. Would that I could find a way to get ye away from all o' this, me sweet boy. I'd do anything to help ye escape this life. Here. Have a big drink of me magic water. You know how it always helps. It'll take yer hunger an' yer hurts away, give ye sweet dreams, an' make ye forget for a time what lies just outside da door that we must face tomorrow."

"If I drink it Momma, will ye stay home wit me tonight? I get scared stayin' all by meself in the dark."

"Ah sure, o' course I will, darlin'. I'll stay cuddlin' with ye until the sun rises," she lied just like she always did.

¹ Esther 4:14, King James Version