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THE
EBONY
SWAN



The Ebony Swan

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For Leona Nevler

Thank you for believing in my books when few others did, and for helping me to achieve my first "best seller." Because of your support, beginning nearly thirty years ago at Fawcett, my books now appear everywhere in paper. Equally important has been your friendship for all these years.

Foreword

My thanks to Virginia Adcock and the volunteer staff of the Lancaster County Library in Kilmarnock for as warm and helpful a reception as I've ever received.

Ann L. Burrows, of the Mary Ball Washington Museum in Lancaster, helped to launch me on my journey of discovery when I visited Virginia's Northern Neck—that peninsula that reaches down the map for a hundred miles between the Rappahannock and Potomac rivers, with its toe in Chesapeake Bay. My thanks as well to F. W.

■ FOREWORD

viii Jenkins, Jr., director of research at the museum, for reading my novel in manuscript and helping me with local details.

Mimi Beckwith, executive director of the Foundation for Historic Christ Church, and a number of docents at the Carter Reception Center, were helpful in introducing me to that remarkable edifice, which so affected me that it became a powerful influence in my story.

I am grateful to Stanley Shelton, Louise Denegre, and Katharine Dunton for showing me their beautiful homes, so that I could “build” the Montoro house in my story and give it a proper setting.

Eleanor Friede, a gifted freelance editor and my good friend and neighbor, first told me of Tangier Island and set me off on my search. I first visited the island—that speck of land out on the Chesapeake between the two shores of Virginia—by tourist boat. Months later, Eleanor (herself a flyer) arranged for friends to take me back to Tangier by small plane. My thanks to James and Heidi Kramer for flying me there in their wonderful “bamboo bomber,” so that I could further explore the island. By that time I had met my characters and knew what they were doing there.

I am indebted to Bette Nohe, of Hilda Crockett’s Chesapeake House on Tangier, for inviting me into her hundred-and-fifty-year-old home, and answering my many questions about the island.

Tanya Dickenson, of the *Rappahannock Record*, not only interviewed me for her paper, but supplied me with clippings that provided endless sources of information about the Northern Neck and Tangier Island. All of this provided me with a setting like no other I’ve ever found for one of my novels.

My deepest thanks go to Dr. Robert Atkins for his radio programs and books, which have helped me to better health, and have given me a basis for what is said by the young doctor in my story.



One

*A*lex slammed the car door as hard as she could, the sound venting some of her irritation. For a moment she leaned against the hood, stretching her right leg so it would lose its stiffness and take her weight more comfortably. At seventy-two she scorned the use of a cane except when absolutely necessary, and resented her inability to walk with the long, easy stride of the dancer she had once been.

As she approached this unwanted meeting with Gilbert Townsend, she knew she must not give him the satisfaction of sensing her

2 physical weakness. She must be in control of her body—she needn't worry about spirit. She still had plenty of that.

With careful steps she walked along the brick path, the afternoon sun of August hot in a clear blue sky. At least the building she approached would be cool inside, with no concession to air-conditioning. Still, it displeased her that Gilbert had chosen this place for their meeting, even though the choice was not illogical, since they were both trustees of Christ Church, which had been designated a Virginia landmark.

The great building was like no other church in Virginia. This was no white-steepled edifice, and its red brick dignity still inspired her with a certain awe. She was thankful that it stood well out in the country, without a town crowding around to detract from its solitary distinction.

Gilbert was nowhere to be seen, and she was grateful for further time to fortify her resolve in order to resist whatever he wanted of her. The peremptory demand of his note had been so disturbing that she'd angrily torn it up. No one took that tone with Alexandrina Montoro. Unfortunately, tearing up his note had not erased his words from her mind, and she felt more vulnerable than she had in years.

I must see you at once, he had written. I have just learned that your granddaughter is arriving today. You must listen to me, and send her away as soon as possible.

That was all, except for asking her to meet him here. His very secretiveness was troubling, and she'd begun to feel both annoyed and alarmed in spite of efforts to reassure herself.

Her mirror had given her some comfort when she'd dressed for this meeting. She had been tall for a ballet dancer, and she had lost none of her height to age. Her back was still straight, and if there were imperfections of figure, they were hidden by the white Chinese jacket—one of several she had had made for her in Hong Kong—which sported a delicate spray of blue embroidery over one shoulder. If all her once-famous young beauty had vanished, she was still a handsome woman, and the heavy coil of hair at the nape of her neck was not yet entirely gray. As a girl it had been her pride—long and gleaming black—her Spanish heritage from Peru.

Whatever pain she had suffered over her daughter's death, with her husband's death following a few months later, nothing from that time could hurt her now. She had steeled herself against being upset

by many things, including an impending visit by a granddaughter she had not seen since that time of tragedy—twenty-five years ago. 3

Perhaps she could quiet her inner spirit with an old ritual that had served her well over the years she had been visiting this church. She began by fixing her eyes upon the bricks at her feet, allowing her gaze to follow the path slowly, seeing only what was small and easily encompassed; then lifting her eyes a little to reach the open gate set in low brick walls that stretched away on either hand—walls that had been built onto the original three-hundred-year-old foundations. Beyond the gate, the walk led to two shallow steps up to the door. All this was earthbound and immediate—small realities she took for granted, but which helped to still her inner turmoil.

She moved toward the gate, allowing her eyes to lift to the simple, gracefully framed doorway, then upward to the arch above. Still higher, her gaze reached a white-spoked oxe-eye window where the peaked roof began.

Now was the moment. She tilted her head back and let the full dramatic impact reduce her to a tiny human speck that hardly mattered. This perspective was good for her much-too-human soul. She could shed vanity and pride, and put aside the protective shield that shut out all emotions that might hurt her.

Massive red brick glowed in the sun. The church, built in a shortened cruciform shape that looked almost square, possessed a marvelous balance that pleased the eye and raised the spirit. Tremendous gray roofs slanted into the sky, their tipped-up corners suggesting the Chinese, though the architecture was entirely English. There were authorities who claimed that the design was pure Christopher Wren, with a balanced grandeur that was forever satisfying to the beholder. Even though Alex Montoro was no longer on speaking terms with God, in this spot she could not deny some mysterious power that strengthened her.

As she stood at the gate, deliberately releasing tension, anger subsided, and new strength flowed through her. She had every reason to dislike the man she had come to meet, but he could not touch her now. She was her own strong self again. For that little while when she'd been very young she had danced as prima ballerina in the capitals of the world. "Drina," they had called her. She had been showered with applause and love and praise. Such memories still gave her a certain manner that she could summon when it was

4 needed. Stage presence, perhaps, and there were those who found it intimidating. Unfortunately, Gilbert never had.

As she moved up the walk, a man appeared through the church door, and stood staring down at her from the steps. She had not expected him to be inside the building, and for a moment she was disconcerted.

He was a big man, still broad-shouldered and good-looking. Men aged more successfully than women, she thought ruefully, and he had developed an impressive, authoritative manner. Sheer theatrics, of course. When young, he had once aspired—unsuccessfully—to the stage. His gray hair, which used to be a shining blond, was still thick, and he wore it brushed back in a style that showed his wide forehead. Younger, more supple flesh had given way to a sculpted, stony look, making his profile sharp.

She had no need to be afraid of him, she told herself. He was of no more consequence than he'd ever been. It was only some sixth sense that warned her that he might now be a threat to the peaceful life she had so painfully achieved.

The smile he flashed had lost none of its dramatic quality. "Alex!" he cried. "How marvelous you look!"

He didn't exactly leap down the steps—she noted that he, too, had a knee problem—but he came down quickly, and before she could draw back, he caught up her hand, bowing over it, touching it lightly with his lips, then raising his head to look deeply into her eyes. All mockery, of course.

She snatched her hand back impatiently. "Don't perform, Gilbert. Just tell me why I've been summoned here in this ridiculous way."

He didn't seem to mind her tone. Nearly fifty years ago, when she and Juan Gabriel Montoro had first come here from Peru to escape the dangerous political situation at home, Gilbert had tried to ingratiate himself, undoubtedly impressed by Juan Gabriel's fame as a distinguished novelist. Her husband had been thirty years older than Alex, and that, she supposed, had made her seem fair game to a dashing would-be young actor. She had been unfaithful to Juan Gabriel only once, and that had not been with Gilbert Townsend.

"I thought we might talk inside," he said, and turned to open the door for her, not waiting for agreement.

Historic Christ Church was one of Virginia's treasures, and open to visitors only during the warmer months. Unheated and unlighted, it was closed when the weather grew chilly, though congregations in

the past must have attended bundled in winter clothes. She was not pleased that Gilbert wanted this conference to take place inside. This was not the church of her youth—she had followed her husband in turning away from that—and she had never made her peace with whatever it was she felt when she stepped within these walls. Sometimes she needed that spiritual life, yet at the same time resented it. But unless she held back, she had no choice now. She must know what this meeting was all about.

Thankful that the steps were shallow, she went up easily and stepped into the lower nave. At once she felt the chill of limestone flags beneath her feet. The interior was always cool, no matter how warm it grew outside.

There were no open rows of seats for the congregation, only the high pine-paneled walls of pews on either hand. Gilbert motioned her on and she walked toward the transept aisle. Below the chancel, set opposite each other, were two pews larger than the rest. Of course Gilbert would choose one of the pews that had been reserved for the use of Robert Carter and his family. “King” Carter, they’d called him, and he had owned a good part of Virginia in early days. Carter had built this church, and his stone tomb, along with the tombs of his two wives, stood in the churchyard at one side.

Gilbert probably sensed and enjoyed her reluctance to hold their meeting here. They both knew the rules very well. Signs asked visitors not to touch or enter the pews, in order to preserve old wood. But, arrogant as ever, Gilbert opened the door of Robert Carter’s pew for her, and reluctantly she stepped up to the higher wooden floor that had protected the feet of worshipers from cold limestone. Until she understood the urgent purpose behind his demand to send Susan away, Alex would go along with what he wished.

Hard wooden benches ran around the rectangle of the pew, though history reported that Robert Carter had placed his own comfortable chair in this particular pew. When seated, none of the congregation could see the members of any other family, and only the minister in his high walnut pulpit, set centrally, could look down upon his flock—every sinner in view. Narrow circular stairs led up two levels of the pulpit, the top level placed beneath a handsome canopy that formed a sounding board for the stern sermons that must have echoed through these spaces. In spite of her anxiety, when Alex looked up she felt once more the mystery and wonder within these walls. It had been years since she had been able to pray, and she had

6 long ago discarded those Catholic prayers taught her by the nuns when she was a child. Now, however, as had happened before, some wordless petition seemed to fill her, asking for help from—somewhere. Perhaps asking for a shield against trouble to come.

"Please sit down," Gilbert said. At least he spoke softly in this hushed place.

She lowered herself carefully to a hard bench, her back straight, her long, dancer's feet in flat-heeled slippers placed neatly together. Vanity had rejected all efforts to get her into "sensible" shoes.

"I'm waiting to hear your explanation," she said. "I have other things to do today. Why are we here? There are a hundred other spots where we could have met privately—if that's what you wanted."

"My sister Hallie suggested that we meet here. Besides, I know you have a special feeling for this place, Alex. Maybe you're even afraid of its invisible power. I thought you might be more amenable to reason if we met here."

Hallie! She might have known. There were few pies into which Hallie Townsend didn't poke with her curious, nimble fingers.

"Explain what you mean by *reason*," she said.

She'd grown increasingly aware of a nervous quality behind the bluff of his assured manner. He was worried about something, and she had no idea what his sister Hallie had to do with this. Except that Hallie worked as a docent for the Carter Reception Center connected with the church, and if they met here, she might be able to meddle.

For a moment Gilbert moved about the enclosed space without speaking, his back to her as he gazed upward at the pulpit. Perhaps the pulpit was a symbol of whatever he wanted to conceal from Alex's penetrating look.

When he spoke again, his naturally dramatic manner fell away. "I never told you before, Alex, since it seemed pointless, but I visited Juan Gabriel a month or so before your daughter's death. We'd had a—disagreement—and I simply wanted to make my peace. But since he'd suffered a stroke it was difficult for him to talk. Everyone else was out of the house and I saw him alone. He managed to tell me that he didn't want to live—that life meant nothing to him anymore."

The chill of the building seeped into her bones, but Alex kept very still to prevent emotion from surfacing visibly.

"I don't believe you, Gilbert. I was very close to my husband, and he never lacked courage. If it hadn't been for the shock he suffered

when Dolores died, I know he would have recovered. What are you driving at?" 7

"Hallie told me yesterday that your granddaughter is coming here. If she stays for long she will begin to ask questions. Can you risk what she may recall during this visit? Do you want anything of what really happened to surface?"

The trembling started at the pit of her stomach, but she held herself still, betraying nothing. "My daughter died in an accident—a fall down the stairs. She tripped. I don't know what you are implying."

His eyes seemed to deny everything she was saying. "As I recall, when you returned home that day to find your daughter dead at the foot of the stairs, Juan Gabriel had struggled from his wheelchair and lay unconscious in the upper hall."

"That's true. We believe he tried to come to Dolores's aid. We found him in a coma from which he never recovered, except for regaining consciousness a few moments before his death."

In those final moments, he had managed a few words as he struggled to speak. Frightening words. Now Gilbert was thrusting her back into that time of anguish and fear.

"I still have no idea why you brought me here to talk about this," she told him coldly.

"Don't you? Think about it, Alex. There's still time to send the child away before anything surfaces in her mind. What she might remember could destroy your peace forever."

"That's nonsense! In any case, why should you become involved in my affairs?"

He had turned to face her as he spoke, and now he made a helpless gesture. "My sister Hallie cares about you, Alex. I'm here because she felt that I should talk with you. Emily agrees. She thinks you would never listen to Hallie."

Gilbert had two sisters—Hallie a few years younger, and Emily as many years older. A long time ago, before she moved away, Emily had been Alex's good friend. Friends parted and changed, and she hadn't seen Emily in years. An even older pain lay in that direction. And, after all, Emily had nothing to do with the present.

Over the years Gilbert's full lips had thinned, and they twisted now unpleasantly. "There's another reason for our concern, Alex. Lawrence Prentice was my good friend, as well as being Dolores's husband, and Susan's father. Hallie was fond of him too, and we both

8 grieved to hear of his death in New Mexico a few months ago. He never wanted his daughter to return to Virginia, and Hallie and I respect his feelings."

Anger stirred. Hallie had always had crushes on unavailable men, and she'd been more than fond of Lawrence Prentice. Of course, Lawrence had detested her—as he'd detested Alex as well, blaming her unreasonably for Dolores's death. Afterward, he had taken Susan away to punish her grandmother.

She spoke sharply. "I never had any respect for Lawrence Prentice. He was the wrong husband for my daughter. I remember Hallie's crush on him very well."

The moment she spoke, she recognized the unkindness of her words. She might not have much affection for Hallie, but she had always felt sorry for her, and tried to be kind. Gilbert was probably equally moved to this action by his own long-held malice toward Alex Montoro. Right now all she wanted was for him to go away.

"Since Lawrence is dead, Gilbert, all this is water under the bridge. It's because he has died that Susan is free of his restraint and can come here. She's never understood what she thought was my long silence, and we need to talk face to face."

He rejected this dismissal of all he'd been hinting at. "Do you really believe the past exists in some closed-off compartment, Alex? That it doesn't grow into the future and affect everything that happens later? You may be lifting a barrier that is better left down."

One thing she knew. While Susan was here she must keep her away from Gilbert Townsend at all costs.

He came abruptly to sit beside her, and when she stiffened, he laughed slyly.

"Don't worry, Alex. You still matter to me, and I don't want to see you hurt."

It was hard to contain her indignation, but she ignored the falsity of his words. Whatever his reason for what he was doing, affection for her played no part in it.

"You called Susan a child, Gilbert. She's hardly that. Her father took her away from me twenty-five years ago, so she is thirty-one. Old enough to make her own decisions. I shall welcome her and try to make her visit a happy one. I don't suppose she will stay very long."

Before Alex could rise to leave, the nearby transept door opened, and footsteps sounded on the flagstones. Alex and Gilbert sat very still. Undoubtedly some sightseer had wandered in, but they couldn't

see over the walls of the pew to discover who it was. In a few moments the visitor would probably go away. 9

Instead, a woman's voice called out to them. "Gilbert? Alex? Are you here?"

Alex recognized the high, rather querulous voice of Gilbert's sister. His reaction, however, surprised her. He looked as though his sister's presence alarmed him. "Tell her nothing of what we discussed," he cautioned in a whisper.

As Hallie opened the door of the pew, he got to his feet, staring at her. Hallie didn't step up to the wooden floor to join them, but stayed outside—a tall, thin figure in a shapeless tan dress that hung nearly to her ankles. There had always seemed an immaturity about her. She was the youngest of the three, and some aspect of her had remained a child. An inquisitive child. Her eyes were bright and much too eager.

"Well!" She sounded pleased. "An assignation?"

"Don't be foolish, Hallie. You knew I was meeting Alex here. Alex, we'll talk another time, but do think about what I've said. I'll leave Hallie to you." He went through the door past his sister and out of the church, moving hastily, as though eager to be away.

"Now what was that all about?" Hallie asked.

"You'd better ask your brother. He told me that meeting me here was your idea."

"It was."

Alex was silent, waiting for Hallie to continue or leave. Not that she'd ever been one to take a hint—and she didn't now.

"Susan was such a darling little girl. I can't wait to see her again. It was sad that she had to leave under such unhappy circumstances."

"Let's give her time to catch her breath, shall we, Hallie? She'll be tired after a long trip."

"Of course. Well—I'll get back to work, though it's been a slow day. I just wanted to look in on you two since I knew you were here. I'll see you later on, after Susan has arrived." She went clattering away over the flagstones, and it was a relief to have them both gone, though Alex felt more bewildered and anxious than ever. The last thing she wanted Susan's coming to do was to dredge up the past. At the time, the horror of what had happened to Dolores seemed to cause a loss of memory on Susan's part. She had been unable to tell anyone what had happened, and questions had sent her into bursts of hysteria. Alex could only hope that nothing of that experience had remained with her over the years.

10 Remembering where she was, Alex wondered if some help might come to her in these surroundings. She looked up into the vast, vaulted spaces overhead. There were no cross beams, nothing to interfere with that airy expanse. Space soared thirty feet above her head, with the roof rising another ten feet higher. Light glowed through three oxeve windows set in deep eaves, while high, arched windows along the outside walls added more formal lighting. The effect was softly subdued and quieting to her troubled spirit.

Somehow she must find the courage to deal with all the concerns that Susan's arrival would bring into her life. But for now, Susan was on her way, and Alex wanted to be home when her granddaughter arrived.

Outside, in the warmth of the afternoon, she followed the walk to her car, passing ancient gravestones where other members of the Carter family were buried. She must not allow Gilbert's silly notions to worry her. He was, after all, what he had always been—a frustrated actor. Unsuccessful on the stage, he had turned to a second profession—teaching early American history at a small local college. He had used his acting ability to dramatize his subjects, and his classes had been enormously popular. He had managed to teach even his more unmotivated students to appreciate history. Now that he had retired, he claimed to be working on a definitive history of Christ Church, though no one had seen any pages of his manuscript as yet.

To everyone's further astonishment he had purchased an old mansion on the Rappahannock River and turned it into an inn he called The Mulberry Tree. It had recently received several stars in a highly regarded guide. An innkeeper could benefit from being an actor too.

Ironically his son Eric also wanted to go on the stage, and Gilbert was opposing him at every turn, perhaps because he knew the hardships so well. As usual, Eric had his Aunt Hallie's support—which must have added to Gilbert's displeasure.

Back in her car, Alex drove to Kilmarnock and turned east toward home. The Northern Neck of Virginia—a peninsula that lay between the Rappahannock and the Potomac rivers, with its toe in the Chesapeake—had offered a safe haven to Juan Gabriel when they had fled from Peru. Because of its position between two rivers, the Northern Neck was almost an island, and had been isolated from the rest of the state. Even when bridges were built, things didn't change a great deal.

Along the road loblolly pines thinned occasionally to make room

for fields of soy beans or healthy stands of high corn. Away from Kilmarnock a side road led to Sawmill Creek and the house Juan Gabriel had bought for them when they'd first arrived in what was to be their adopted country. Virginia's history and pleasant climate had interested him, so they had come here. Having lived in Virginia most of her life, Alex took pride in being an American, and had managed to rid herself of all but a trace of her Spanish accent.

The ragged coastline of the peninsula was etched with dozens of Tidewater creeks, and it was at the head of one of these that Juan Gabriel found the house he wanted. Victorian architecture had fascinated him, and since there were many such houses, he had bided his time and found just the gem he had hoped to acquire.

The move away from Peru and the danger that country held for him had been good for Juan Gabriel's writing. Already a distinguished novelist whose books were read in translation everywhere, he had found new perspectives in the United States and his creativity had thrived.

Alex had loved each and every one of his books, except *The Black Swan*, which had left her troubled and unhappy—though she'd assured herself that it was only fiction.

He had continued to write until he had his stroke. After that there had been nothing. He hadn't wanted to live as he was. She knew that, so she quickly dismissed Gilbert's implications. She mustn't think about his words. She was eager now to be home.

When she turned into her driveway, George Dixon came around the house to open the car door and help her out. George and his wife, Gracie, had been with her almost since the Montoros' arrival, and both were dependable friends. George was part Indian and not as dark as Gracie. Almost all the Indians were gone from the Northern Neck, but here and there one saw the high cheekbones and long noses that signified Indian blood.

George conveyed his news quickly. "Your granddaughter phoned, Miss Alex, and Miss Theresa took the call. She'll tell you."

Alex thanked him, and when he'd taken the car around to the garage she stood for a moment on the front walk looking up at the house. Fanciful nineteenth-century whims prevailed, with gables, a flat, cupola-topped tower, peaked roofs at different levels—all impractical and delightful. These days, Alex seldom climbed the stairs to the upper floors. A comfortable suite had been arranged for her on the first floor and she lived in it happily.