

MASQUE
of
HONOR

SHARON VIRTS

BOOK ONE FIELDS *of* HONOR SERIES

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OF
HONOR

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PART ONE

Premonitions,
Foreshadowings of some terrible disaster
Oppress my heart.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “The Masque of Pandora”

CHAPTER 1

August 15, 1813, Peach Orchard Camp, Fort Norfolk, Virginia

Lieutenant John “Jack” Mason McCarty woke with a pounding in his head and a stinging on his neck. Swatting at the black fly, he shifted on the cot to find a more comfortable position in the sweltering heat. The movement caused the throbbing in his head to worsen. Amid the pulsing pain, a voice boomed somewhere above him.

He opened an eye. Blinding rays of filtered light cut through the storm thundering inside his skull. He squinted. A shadowy figure stood over him.

“Get up, Jack!”

The shrillness of the voice compounded the intensity of the throbbing. Jack rolled toward the tent wall. “Go away!”

“Come on, Jack! Colonel Mason called the officers, and you already missed this morning’s roll. Now, let’s go!” Lieutenant James Dulaney kicked the leg of the cot.

“Stop that!”

“I’ll stop when you get up.” James kicked the cot harder.

Jack looked over his shoulder, his head on fire and his temper beginning to flare. “For chrissake, you are worse than my mother!”

James laughed. “Your mother would have thrown a basin of water on you by now. Come on, Jack. Up!”

With a defeated huff, Jack sat up and steadied himself on the cot’s edge.

“God, you look awful,” James said.

“And good morning to you, too, *Mother*.” Jack spit a putrid taste from his mouth onto the floor.

James shook his head. “In the lowers again?” Jack nodded as he rubbed the back of his neck. “You know how Colonel Mason feels about his officers gambling with enlisted men.”

Jack scoffed and spit on the floor again. “Colonel Mason.”

Growing up on neighboring farms in the Northern Neck, Jack had known James since they were children. Both were members of Virginia’s land gentry, with James’s home located along the Potomac River adjacent to General Washington’s Mount Vernon, and Jack’s family seat situated across the Pohick Bay from his grandfather’s estate of Gunston Hall. Having just reached their eighteenth years and following in the footsteps of their fathers who had fought in the Revolution, both were serving as staff officers in this latest war against the British. Like Jack, James was tall, standing just over six feet, with broad shoulders that narrowed to a trim waist. His hazel eyes were shaped like almonds and set wide on either side of a long, aquiline nose. Normally, James’s sable-brown hair was brushed neatly from his face, but this morning his locks were as black as Jack’s and glued to his forehead in a sweaty paste. Dressed in full uniform, James was glistening with perspiration.

Jack nodded in the direction of James’s jacket. “It must be a hundred degrees. Why are you in that?”

“As I said, Colonel Mason’s called for us.”

“It’s Sunday. Even God gave it a rest on Sunday.”

“Tell that to the British.”

A sudden seriousness darkened Jack’s face. “Are they coming up the river again?”

“Not today. At least not yet.” James glanced at the floor before bringing his eyes back to Jack’s. “Captain Alexander’s patrol captured McNally this morning.”

“Shane?” James nodded. “Jesus.” Shane McNally was one of the camp’s many boys who had enlisted to serve. He had grown up on the McCarty family estate, and Jack and James had known him all their lives. “Where?”

“Dunno. But you need to get cleaned up. The colonel called us

for ten.” James pulled a timepiece from his waistcoat. “Which by my watch is in twelve minutes.”

Jack lifted his head and drew in a long breath, gathering the where-withal to stand.

James shook his head. “That’s what happens when you imbibe that coffin varnish the enlisted men drink.” Jack shot James another dirty look.

Jack stood from the cot and noticed his boots were still on from the night before. With his first step, Jack stumbled over his hat and nearly fell into the washstand. James reached for Jack’s arm to steady him.

“Careful.” James picked up the coat of Jack’s uniform that was lying half under the cot, brushing dirt from the sleeve. “Your quarters are a mess.”

“Yeah, well.” At the washstand, Jack skimmed dead insects from the basin before pouring more stagnant water from the pitcher. He cupped his hands, splashed his face, and took a handful of water in his mouth, before spitting it on the floor. “Tastes like something died.”

“Probably a drowned rat at the bottom of one of those crocks you were drinking from last night.”

Jack threw another look in James’s direction. “And when did you become a saint?”

James laughed. “I’m no saint. I’m just of no mind to punish myself so.”

Jack wiped a hand over the stubble on his chin before pushing water from his fingers through his hair. He tucked the shirt into his trousers and straightened his collar. “Do you see my waistcoat?”

Glancing around the canvas walls, James spotted the vest on the back of a chair. He grabbed it and tossed it to Jack, watching as Jack struggled to put it on. “I’m worried about you, my friend. Since William left, you’ve been—”

Jack stopped buttoning the waistcoat and glared at James. “Since my brother left, I’ve been what? Being who I am?”

“You’re not one of the enlisted, Jack.”

“How do you know what I am?”

James lowered his eyes, kicking the toe of his boot into the floor before looking back at Jack, who was still staring at him. “We need to make haste. We don’t want to keep Colonel Mason waiting.”

Jack scoffed. "That man has little patience for anything." James remained silent while Jack finished dressing and the two exited the stifling heat of the tent.

What once had been rows of fruited trees surrounded by mounds of grass and golden mustard were now axed stumps engulfed in powdered dirt that turned to thick black mud when it rained. Built to protect Fort Norfolk's flank, Peach Orchard Camp was a mix of tents and log cabins aligned in a grid, with officers' quarters near the gate and enlisted men's at the rear. Far from the eyes of the officers were shelters along the camp's rear earthen wall. Jack was all too familiar with "the lowers," where jugs of grog were plentiful, and games of hazard could be found on any given night.

With little breeze stirring and the August sun baking overhead, the temperature outside was oppressive, the air pungent with fetid odors of men and death. The suffocating misery of heat and sickness was routine in the lowlands along the Elizabeth River. During the day, biting flies and swarming gnats tortured the encamped soldiers. At night it was mosquitos that plagued them. But their greatest source of suffering came from boredom and a longing for home.

As Jack and James made their way across camp, a wagon carrying the bodies of two men kicked up a cloud of dust as it rolled by on its way to the grave pit. Jack pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and covered his nose and mouth, fighting to keep from losing his stomach. He had been told that he would get used to the smell, but he had not.

The officers of the Fifty-Sixth Regiment of Virginia's militia had gathered outside their commanding officer's quarters. As Jack and James approached, Major George Rust, with dark, deep-set eyes, gave Jack a once-over and a disapproving look. Jack lowered his gaze and fell in with the others waiting in the hot summer sun for the colonel to emerge. When the last officer had joined the group, Captain Gerard Alexander leaned through the doorway of the log cabin and called inside. Within moments, Colonel Armistead Mason stepped from the shadows, the epaulets on his shoulders and the buttons on his dark-blue coat glimmering in the hazy sunshine. His trousers were white and crisply pressed, and his black boots polished to a high gloss. A round hat, tilted to the left with a black cockade, covered most of his auburn hair. Despite the sweltering heat, there was not a visible drop

of sweat on the colonel. He gleamed in the morning light, every part of his appearance in perfect order. At his emergence, the officers saluted. Jack, too, straightened his shoulders and raised his right hand to his temple.

“At ease, gentlemen.” The men relaxed their salute, but the tension was as thick as the sweltering air. Colonel Mason cleared his throat and scanned their weathered faces. “Upon my arrival here two weeks ago, this regiment was in complete disarray. My first priority has been to establish order and instill discipline among the men. As you would expect, not all are happy with the rigor of military doctrine. Last week, three of these dissenters abandoned their posts and absconded from camp. Desertion, gentlemen, next to insubordination, is the greatest enemy of an army. And I will tolerate neither.” Colonel Mason removed his hat from his head and tucked it under his arm. Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, he dabbed his hairline.

He sweats after all, Jack thought as the colonel pushed the handkerchief across his forehead and back into his pocket.

“Captain Alexander’s patrol apprehended one of the deserters this morning and has returned the man to camp.” Colonel Mason turned to Gerard Alexander. “Well done, Captain, well done indeed.” The colonel outstretched his hand to shake the captain’s as the officers nodded. Gerard Alexander, who was sporting an ear-to-ear grin, reminded Jack of an obedient puppy waiting for a bone and a pat on the head.

“Gentlemen,” Colonel Mason said, his brown eyes nearly black with intensity, “we must set an example among the men that desertion will not be tolerated.” Jack’s stomach tightened into knots. “The federal army has experienced these same issues and has implemented policy to execute absconders. Since then, desertion has largely ceased in the federal ranks. Now their regiments in the northern campaign are stronger than ever against the enemy. I have studied these methods and discussed them with General Taylor and the governor. We all agree on the need for a firm hand.”

The knot in Jack’s gut began to twist. Officers shifted their stances and exchanged glances.

Major Rust cleared his throat and broke the silence. “Are you suggesting, sir, that we execute McNally?”

“I’m not making a suggestion, Major. I’m issuing an order. Once

Captain Alexander convenes a firing squad, we shall muster the men onto the quad and execute the private as an example to the others.”

“You can’t be serious!” The words flew from Jack’s mouth before his lips had time to stop them.

Colonel Mason tilted his head in Jack’s direction. “Excuse me, Lieutenant?”

“McNally is sixteen years old, Colonel. He’s not a soldier, but a boy!” James moved behind Jack and squeezed Jack’s elbow in warning.

Colonel Mason’s dark eyes narrowed. “Are you questioning my authority, Lieutenant?” Colonel Mason scanned Jack from head to toe. “Look at yourself. You’re completely out of order.”

“Colonel Mercer would never have issued such a command,” Jack said, feeling blood rush up his neck, desperate to do something—anything—to intervene.

“Colonel Mercer isn’t in charge here anymore, now, is he?” Colonel Mason snapped. “Might I remind you that Colonel Mercer was too sick to command. Not that he was effective in leading his regiment in good health either.”

Captain Alexander snickered under his breath at Colonel Mason’s insult as the other officers exchanged cautionary glances. An angry flush spread from Jack’s neck to his face. Colonel Charles Fenton Mercer, a mentor and friend, had recruited Jack into the regiment, and Jack had served as both Mercer’s aide-de-camp and his personal secretary. By all accounts Fenton Mercer was brilliant and had taught Jack more than any teacher had. James increased his grip on Jack’s elbow. Jack shrugged free as Major Rust interceded.

“Colonel, I believe Lieutenant McCarty’s reaction is representative of the response we may receive from the entire regiment should we execute McNally as you suggest. It’s not that I nor any one of the officers question your orders, sir, but such punishment will most certainly erode morale and could possibly incite desertion en masse or, worse, mutiny. With all due respect, Colonel, I believe we should be measured in this instance. Punish the soldier, yes. But having him face a firing squad without knowing the consequence of his actions beforehand may be considered extreme.”

Colonel Mason fixed his pensive eyes on the major. The major

stared back, unwavering. Not a word was uttered, and the silence between the two men grew awkward.

“Very well, then,” Colonel Mason said after a long moment. He pinched his shoulders and straightened his posture before looking back at his officers. “Colonel Mercer’s lack of leadership is at fault here. Had he provided proper training and adequate discipline, we would not have such insubordinate behavior and the ensuing morale issue.” Colonel Mason paused his lecture and raised his voice to declare his verdict. “McNally shall be lashed. Going forward, should he or any man abscond from their post, they shall be executed. Let this be the first and final warning. Deserters will be hunted down, dragged back to camp, and stand before a firing squad. Might I remind you that my father, like your fathers, sacrificed greatly to free this country from the tyranny of the British. And we, gentlemen, have been called once again to face the enemy. It is kill or be killed, and we shall not relinquish our responsibility—the responsibility to defend Virginia and our duty to preserve our nation’s freedom!”

With sweat now glowing on his brow, Colonel Mason again removed the handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead before returning the hat to his head. “Captain Alexander, order every man to the quad to witness the lashing of Private McNally.”

Jack shaded his eyes from the blistering sun as he watched them drag Shane McNally to the quad. Shane seemed small as he stumbled through the dust, his face smudged and scratched, his ginger hair dirty and matted. There was fear in his eyes, but he shed not a tear as his hands were tied to the post. *Stay strong, Shane*, Jack thought as the boy’s soiled shirt was pulled from his shoulders and left hanging from the waist of his trousers.

As Captain Alexander raised the whip, Jack turned his head. At the first whistle and crack of the lash, Jack closed his eyes. When the whip cracked on the boy’s back a second time, Jack flinched.

The whip whistled and cracked again. Shane McNally screamed. Jack clenched a fist and held it close at his side. *Stay strong.*

WHACK! Shane McNally began to cry, pleading for forgiveness. With his eyes still closed, Jack shook his head and clutched his fist tighter. *Don't beg, Shane. They won't forgive you.*

WHACK! Shane screamed again. Jack dug his thumb into the side of his leg as he clenched his fingers tighter and tighter, remembering the feel of the leather strap and his own warm blood running down his side before the world had gone white.

From the bestselling author of *Veil of Doubt* and *The Grays of Truth* comes a riveting tale of political intrigue, romance, and betrayal set in antebellum Virginia.

John “Jack” Mason McCarty and his second cousin Armistead Mason are proud sons of the Virginia aristocracy—and as different as two men can be. Deeply ambitious and politically minded, Armistead has his sights on Congress and demands a level of respect he may not deserve. Jack, too, longs to make a name for himself, if he can stop gambling and drinking long enough to use his considerable wit to his advantage. Jack has little patience for Armistead’s arrogance, while Armistead views Jack as a debauched adolescent unworthy of honor or respect—and neither is afraid to voice his opinion of the other.

A poisonous animosity begins to fester between the two men, fueled by political schemes, illicit affairs, and scandalous reports in the press. Though the women who love them urge restraint, their bitter dispute nevertheless sets into motion a devastating chain of events that risks much more than their honor.

The first book in the Fields of Honor series and based on the true events behind the 1819 Mason–McCarty duel, *Masque of Honor* is a story of valor, conviction, and the cost of sacrificing one life to forge another.



SHARON VIRTS is the bestselling author of two historical fiction novels, *Veil of Doubt* and *The Grays of Truth*. *Veil of Doubt* was named a finalist by the American Book Fest’s 2024 Best Book Awards in Best Historical Fiction and by the IAN Book of the Year Awards in the Historical Fiction: Pre-20th Century category. Sharon lives with her husband, Scott Miller, at the Selma Mansion in Virginia, a historic estate they rescued from demolition and lovingly restored. Follow the author on Facebook and Instagram @sharonvirtsbooks and visit www.sharonvirts.com.