



*The Spinster,
the Rebel, and
the Governor*

CHARLENE BELL DIETZ

Praise for *The Spinster, the Rebel, and the Governor*

“This was obviously a labor of love...This was well written and well researched. I was incredibly impressed with the ability to highlight not only political upheaval but the social issues as well. It was a powerful and tightly woven novel.”

National Federation of Press Women

A historical novel inspired by the life of one of Maryland's earliest English colonists. Dietz, the author of *The Flapper, the Imposter, and the Stalker* (2017), fictionalizes the story of Margaret Brent, a wealthy Englishwoman who becomes a prominent figure in Maryland in the mid-17th century... Although little of Margaret's real-life history was recorded, Dietz does a good job of drawing on what's known about her and about the early years of Maryland's colonization to create a well-rounded, convincing portrait. Over the course of the novel, the author employs a great many vivid details that bring everyday life in both England and Maryland into sharp focus... The novel sticks closely to its protagonist's perspective... (and) the book is sweeping in scope, covering Maryland's foundational years from the perspective of a woman who played a crucial role in its existence. A robust imagining of the life of a largely unsung hero.

Kirkus Reviews

The Spinster, the Rebel, and the Governor

A Novel

Charlene Bell Dietz



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List of Characters

England

- Margaret Brent:** Protagonist of this story who insists on righting all wrongs.
- Peter Coats:** (Fictional) Young man who makes trouble.
- William Keith:** (Fictional) Angry itinerant merchant.
- Pip:** (Fictional) Brent's stableboy.
- Dary:** (Fictional) Brent's houseboy.
- Crissa:** (Fictional) Margaret's young maid servant.
- Richard Brent:** Father of Margaret, Mary, Fulk, and Giles.
- Cecil, or Cecilius Calvert:** Second Lord Baltimore. English proprietor of precolonial Maryland.
- Mary Brent:** Loyal younger sister of Margaret.
- Fulk Brent:** An older brother who protect his sisters.
- Giles Brent:** A younger brother looking for an exciting adventure.
- Goodwin:** Blacksmith who becomes an indentured servant.

Maryland

- Simon:** (Fictional) Quarter Master of the ship, *Charity*.
- Leonard Calvert:** Governor of the Province of Maryland and Cecil Calvert's brother.
- Peasley:** (Fictional) Governor Calvert's head servant.
- Missus Davis:** (Fictional) Governor Calvert's maid.
- Henry:** (Fictional) Freeman and musician.
- John Lewger:** Friend of Cecil Calvert and Secretary of precolonial Maryland.
- Father Andrew White:** Arrived in 1634 with Governor Calvert.
- Father Phillip Fisher:** Works closely with Father White.
- William Claiborne:** Early settler living on Kent Island who stirs up trouble.
- Carrie Wells:** (Fictional) Indentured servant needing Margaret's help.
- Jacob Cole:** (Fictional) Carrie Well's master.
- Captain Thomas Cornwallis:** Landholder who donates much to the welfare of the province.
- Thomas Greene:** Arrived with Leonard Calvert 1634. Margaret and Mary's neighbor.
- John Morton:** (Fictional) Freeman with wife, Bess, and toddler, John.
- Chitomachen Kittamaquund:** Tayac of the Piscataway Indians.
- Mary Kittamaquund:** Tayac's young daughter and ward of the governor and Margaret Brent.
- Thomas Harris:** (Fictional) Burgess from Sow's Creek.
- Captain Richard Ingle:** Merchant seaman for precolonial Maryland, from Virginia.

Thomas and John Sturman: Father and son Marylanders who fought against Catholics.

Nathaniel Pope: Freeman who, in 1642, purchases Leonard Calvert's newly built manor.

Edward Hill: A Virginian who, in 1646, took over governorship of precolonial Maryland.

Captain John Price: Head of Leonard Calvert's militia.

Genuine historical knowledge requires nobility of character, a profound understanding of human existence—not detachment and objectivity.

— Friedrich Nietzsche



PART ONE
ENGLAND

Chapter 1

Gloucestershire, England Spring 1638

There is no such difference between men and women, that women may not do great matters, as we have seen by the example of many Saints....

- Mary Ward (1585-1645)

ANYONE NOT LOST IN the loveliness of this fresh-washed spring evening could see trouble afoot. Margaret Brent glanced over her shoulder. Satisfied, she reined Gingo down from a canter into a trot. He flung his head in protest, then expelled a wet-sounding snort.

Margaret's mood matched his. She must not be caught riding in the countryside after dark, and now dusk crept over this gentle land with gray mist slinking along its valley floors. Yet an unusual sight puzzled her. A massive figure knelt in the shadow beside the doorway of a tiny, country chapel. She must investigate.

As misfortune would now have it, when darkness fell her father would be fraught with worry. Nevertheless, she could not ignore what made no sense or some ill deed she might prevent.

When she finished her work in Stratford, Margaret directed Gingo away from the closed shops and noisy taverns in the center of town. Poor Gingo navigated an unsure path, clopping down shadowed alleyways, picking his way over fetid garbage, excrement, and uneven cobbles until they reached the outskirts of the village. He hurried over the wooden bridge, making her cringe when his hooves thudded on the planks.

Margaret's life, or most assuredly her freedom, depended on her avoiding the curious townsmen who might question the business of Sir Richard Brent's spinster daughter riding alone so late in the afternoon. The hour required this detour, unless of course Margaret cared to degrade herself and lie.

Forgive me, dear Father, for the sin of these errant thoughts. I do endeavor to keep the folly of my falsehoods from finding a solid purchase within my heart.

Margaret leaned forward and gave the bay's rust-colored neck a scratch, worked a finger to untangle his black mane, then pulled him down into a plodding walk through puddles left by rain showers. Her loving little gesture would do nothing to help mollify his innate desire to speed. He displayed his unhappiness with another shake of his head. Regardless, she could not pass by this chapel and let some wrong transpire.

If anyone of importance encountered Margaret, she would need more than heaven's helping hand to protect her from unasked questions. In years past, her

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father had held the title of sheriff, but if the gentleman now holding this office had seen her in Stratford at this hour, her father's station would be of no help to her. She knew well the powerful authority of the sheriff and how fast speculative news traveled to the king's men.

Margaret directed Gingo off the main road and onto the sanctuary's path. She tugged him to a stop and recognized the huge figure as Sara Coates' boy. Man-like, with awkward elbows and knees, a voice still at the crackling stage, and haystack hair, he crouched beside the doorstep in the spring grass outside the chapel. The low sun would set within the hour. It washed a butter glow over the spire of this limestone house of worship but left the Coates' boy in shadows.

The boy held something close to his chest and shielded it from sight. Dark earth soiled one knee of his too small breeches. From inside the church, angelic voices concluded their hymn followed by a sonorous male voice.

Choir practice?

"Young man," Margaret called. "Show me what you are hiding."

He flicked a finger over his lips and scowled a warning to her. His too large chin sported several tiny, infected bumps—common of someone his age.

"Stop whatever this nonsense."

The sounds of her words carried no heart. Her attention involved weightier issues of the mind and soul rather than what appeared to be no more than a childish prank.

"Most boys your age leave their silliness at home and busy themselves in productive pursuits."

He needed hard work to make him sweat. Margaret touched the rein against Gingo's neck, her mount obedient, turned and trotted back onto the main path. Her father had changed their stable boy's life. Maybe he could do the same for this young man.

A screech, like the sound of a hawk plunging from the heavens and snatching some poor unsuspecting rabbit, caused her to spin back toward the chapel.

Exchanging shrieks for sobs and squashing her blue, satin gown and petticoats in fists, a diminutive girl danced tippy toed on the chapel step, her blonde curls bobbing. A slender, grass-green snake writhed before her until it found refuge in a crack under a stone.

"Ellie." The boy, howled with laughter. "Your coif's on crooked."

"And you, young Coates, your head is on crooked," Margaret scolded. This boy would come to no good. Someone must step in to redirect his actions. She would call this to her father's attention tonight.

Margaret pulled her gray, woolen cloak tighter, tucked a strand of hair under its hood, then nudged Gingo. He lurched into a gallop with hooves spraying mud flecks that slapped her cheek.

Margaret took the path leading down into the yew-tree forest.

As shadows elongated, another sense of urgency rose within her. The wise do not pass through woods after nightfall. Her father warned of increased treachery on lonely dark roads. She smirked. A younger and shapely lady with fine features might have more to worry about than a lady such as Margaret. She, now thirty-six years, of strong, firm, and tall stock, with unruly red hair, no matter her

numerous suitors, felt certain to be thought of as plain. At this age, she would make an abductor's efforts a waste of both their time.

Yet thieves who might hide in this small forest concerned her more.

Gingo slowed of his own accord when they entered the darkened woods. Fallen, splintered branches, an abundance of gnarled roots that protruded above the barren ground and deep vegetative brambles made staying on the path imperative. Margaret clucked to Gingo, urging him on, but his ears twitched and his hesitancy sent shivers up her spine.

Margaret allowed Gingo to halt while she strained to listen. Something moved—heavy boots chewed down through soft mulch. She saw nothing but she could smell someone, unwashed with the rancidness of vomit. The oak bushes rustled.

A form emerged from the undergrowth, then lurched out from the shadows. William Keith stood in her path. He blocked her way.

Gingo reared and stumbled backwards. He regained his balance with a snort. Margaret patted his neck and whispered to stay calm. Gingo settled, but his withers twitched. Nervous smells from the horse's sweat rose into the damp air.

The man held something, but she couldn't discern what in the evening's poor light.

"William Keith, I am surprised to see you here." Margaret had left his wife and their five children less than an hour ago. "Are you sick?"

Her stomach knotted. Keith had waited for her here. He knew she would ride home through these woods.

"Sick of you, I'd say." He coughed up something, then spat. "Ye have no business talking to my wife. She's got you women plotting agin me. Since I figure you're their leader, I'm here to see an end to your doings." Keith cracked a long, black leather whip toward Gingo. The animal shied sideways. Margaret grabbed the pommel.

She might be able to gallop past him, but in turn he could trip Gingo by wrapping the whip around a leg. If she rode off the side of the path into the forest, Gingo's footing would be difficult. Her horse might stumble over some unseen, gnarly root and break his leg. Yet nothing prevented Margaret from turning back the way she came except the lateness of the hour. Her father would have a search party out soon enough.

"William Keith, please lower your whip."

A soft hollow *eyhoe* with several brief snorts came from behind the bushes. Margaret's heart hurt. She knew Keith used that whip on his sweet and loyal donkey.

He continued to hold the whip at a threatening level.

"Your wife suffers under your unkind hand. Her swollen and split lip did not come from any fall. This afternoon we could see those bruises you left on her cheek. None of us said anything, but I know your temper when you take to drink. You have been a good man and have provided well for your family. Why do you not appreciate her toils to create a comfortable home?"

"Woman, ye know nothing. She deserves what I give her. I forbade her to go to this gathering of yours, yet she defied me." Sweat covered his forehead. "I know

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what goes on. Ye don't just sit and sew, mend, and stitch. All of you talk the faith. This afternoon, at the window's ledge, I heard each of you practicing Latin. Latin! What would the magistrate say to that? But I shan't tell him, because I can't be having them drag her off to prison, burning her at the stake, and leaving me with the young ones."

Margaret held her breath and kept a well-practiced dispassionate look. This drunken man's words would ruin them all.

"Listen, woman. Hear what I have to say to ye." He lowered the whip and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "I'll continue to beat her as long as she continues on with this sham. We're not high born like you and your family. No one looks the other way for us. If the authorities uncover what she's doing, they'll think I approved of her behavior. They won't fine me. Na. They'll put us both under lock, take my lands, and both our heads."

Here stood a frightened, but dangerous, man.

She could understand his frustration, but no one held the right to determine another's spiritual devoutness. His wife would continue to practice Catholicism in this mandated Protestant world, and he would continue to beat her.

Margaret adjusted the angle of her knee into a more comfortable position around the pommel. Then she shifted her weight to her foot in the stirrup, smoothed her skirt, and took time to gather her words.

"William Keith, contemplate what I have to say—because this is true." She leaned forward and stared into his eyes. "I have no influence over the spiritual beliefs of your wife. I have seen few women as pious as she. Even if I never return to your town again, she will continue on with her studies." Margaret straightened her back, which signaled Gingo to get ready to move. "You may continue to abuse her with words, your fist, or your whip, but here is where I give caution. You will not change her, but any man who partakes of his wife's food preparation, or who sleeps soundly beside her at night would be well advised to treat this woman with affection and respect."

"Do not threaten me." He wagged the whip in her direction.

She waited for him to find the words she expected him to say.

"If she poisons me or stabs me in my sleep, she'll be off to prison and the chopping block. She'd never do something dumb as that and leave her children without their ma and pa."

"Except, as God's way, your wife's rounded stomach tells me she is carrying your sixth child. No matter how she chooses to serve her Lord, you must be kind to her. If you continue to incense her emotions to a high level, she might dismiss her pious ways." As drunk as he appeared, Margaret saw he still attended to her words. "Then if you are done away with, she will plead her belly in court. The odds say she will be home in no time, tending to the five other young ones. Your eldest son will inherit all your goods and earnings. He will care for your wife, and she will enjoy what your hard work has provided. The best part, your wife will no longer have to endure your cruelty."

She snapped the reins and Gingo lurched ahead.

Keith leaped aside as she had guessed.

"Good evening, William Keith. I am late."

* * *

In less than an hour, Gingo trotted up the familiar darkened lane and headed toward the comfort of his horse barn. Candle lamplights shining out from the downstairs windows of the manor gave the appearance of a ball or attendance of dinner guests at the least.

Margaret's uneasiness of the evening increased. Her father never entertained anymore, and visitors to this house would not be of the festive nature. She would have seen horses about the road if her father had called friends in to search for her.

The stable boy stepped from the doorway of the barn, swinging a lantern high. When the wedge of light caught Gingo and Margaret, Pip doffed his cap and took hold of Gingo's bridle with his other hand.

"Your father's been asking after you, m'lady. I tol' him you'd be making your presence afore dark."

Margaret slipped her leg from around the horn of the pommel and eased down off Gingo. Straightening her skirts and pushing back her hood, she gave Gingo's ear a quick scratch, his neck a pat, then nodded to Pip. As Margaret scurried along the moonlit path to the manor, she made out the shape of a carriage. Hurrying up to it, her confusion mounted.

Cecilius Calvert's horse and carriage stands unattended in our courtyard. What trouble brings the second Lord Baltimore here alone without a driver and after dark?

Chapter 2

To make women learned and foxes tame has the same effect—to make them more cunning.

- King James I (1566-1625)

ALERTED BY THE SOUND of her approach, the carriage horse twitched his ears, quivered, and blew air from his nostrils. Margaret skirted around the carriage. She whispered to the handsome beast and stroked his nose. Once he settled, she hurried across the cobbles and up to the massive hand-carved oak door. Before she could grasp the handle, the door opened, letting out a sliver of yellow light. Crissa peeked out.

“Lady Margaret.” She held the door wide. “I feared you would miss an important family gathering in the drawing room with Lord Baltimore.” She lifted her hands to remove Margaret’s cloak.

Margaret nodded but swept past and hurried toward the spacious room off the passage near the ornately carved oak staircase. The last time she had seen Cecil Calvert was at his father’s funeral five years ago. Cousin George’s title of Lord Baltimore had been bestowed by King James, and after his death the title had passed down to this eldest son, Cecil. The Brent family enjoyed a sense of security, having the Calvert men as friends.

Her moment of comfort slipped into sorrow—a personal one. Six years ago, Margaret, her siblings, her father, and the first Lord Baltimore with Cecil had all been together—another most unhappy occasion. They had congregated in the village of Bredon for her mother’s funeral.

Margaret tugged open the door to the drawing room. The men, intent on documents spread before them, ignored all. This seriousness of her three brothers—Fulke, Giles, and Edward—her father, and the second Lord Baltimore, Cecil Calvert worried her. They stood around the large walnut table. Their murmurs and questions mixed with the crackle of a fresh-laid fire.

The glowing flames enhanced the sun-colored limestone of their fireplace. Three of Margaret’s sisters, Mary, Ann, and Jane, stood near the hearth, conversing as if waiting for some pronouncement from the men.

Her other three sisters resided in a French convent. Margaret doubted she’d ever see them again.

Dary must have been summoned to lay the fire. The sandy-haired lad pulled the brocaded tapestries across the multi-paned windows. The drapes, the room’s oak panels running from floor to ceiling, and the warmth of the fire had not erased the evening’s chill.

No one noticed Margaret enter the room. She unclasped her cloak and slid it

from her shoulders.

Crissa, ever present, whisked it away. Margaret moved to the table to join her brothers.

What papers had captured their attention?

Everyone ignored her.

“Lord Baltimore, Father, what enchants everyone so this evening?”

The men raised their gaze, and her father straightened. She wanted to be let in closer, but as usual, her brothers would not step aside.

“My lady,” Lord Calvert spoke, “the evening would not be complete without your presence. I say, Sir Richard, your house is full of charming women.”

“I quite agree, Lord Calvert. And here you are at last, my dear.” Richard Brent raised an eyebrow and smiled.

“Father, I am curious to see what causes such great interest.”

“And so, you should be.” Lord Calvert grinned. “We’re studying a rather newly drawn map by Hendrik Hondius. You know—of Holland.”

“I am surprised to learn a map of Holland engages you so.”

“My apologies. He’s a cartographer who resides in Holland. This map shows a section of the New World—the Colony of Virginia and the fertile lands to the north.”

Richard motioned his sons to step aside and let him pass. The years had not stolen her father’s inherent good looks even though the sharpness of his jaw and brow had softened. His eyebrows grew bushier and grayer with the passing of time, but he still stood straight and tall. He could issue commands without saying a word.

His three sons stepped aside to let him pass. Then the brothers crowded back to the table, filling the space Richard had just vacated. Her father took her elbow and escorted her nearer her sisters by the fireplace. He stopped, frowned, and pointed to Margaret’s cheek. Her sisters watched.

Margaret tilted her head, and he made a wiping motion.

Mud. She brushed the fleck from her face.

The three sisters in turn averted their eyes and continued their conversation. Richard said, “When darkness fell, I started to worry.”

“You are kind to be concerned about me at my age, Father. I am sorry for any distress I may have caused, but I faced an unavoidable delay.”

“My worry has nothing to do with your capabilities but more to do with the unpredictability of these times. I’m relieved to know you’re home.”

Margaret put her hand on her father’s wrist. “This visit surprises me. Does not Cecil live in Ireland?”

“He and his wife are staying with her ailing father, Lord Arundel, at Wardour Castle.”

“Still quite far?”

“West of Salisbury. Manageable.”

Margaret nodded. “I suspect Cecil has come here to propose some untenable situation, which occupies your thoughts, Father.”

“He arrived only a few minutes before you. We’ve not had an opportunity to sort out his matters of concern. However, I can assure you there’s nothing new we

haven't already heard. But it's good of him to come, don't you think?" He paused. "I believe the occasion of his visit warrants all of us to be regaled with goblets of fine wine or even pale ale. Would you see to this please?"

Margaret glanced around for Dary. He knelt at the fireplace now, touching candle to flame so he could proceed to light more lamps. Soft footsteps behind her announced Crissa had returned.

"May I be of service to you, my lady?"

The girl seemed to sense when Margaret needed help. Margaret sent her off to tell Pursell to serve them the Chablis from Pontigny Abbey.

Her father had regained his former place, bending over the table.

This familiar irritable sense of exclusion more than annoyed her. Her cheeks warmed. She never knew how to contend with her anger when the men shut her out of discussions.

Anger—a shameful emotion.

Yet, she refused to be rude. Still, with God's hand, if tonight's assembly concerned her or her sisters, they *would* hear her voice.

Mary touched Margaret's arm. "Come sit."

Fatigue settled into her bones. Yet curiosity about what the men plotted kept her on her feet. Jane and Ann looked at her as if they expected some comment.

Unlike Mary and Margaret, these younger two, still in their early twenties, showed exuberance undiminished by a life of familiarity, customs, and disappointments. Ann's wide-blue eyes studied Margaret, waiting for something. Her cinnamon-blond curls fell softly along her pale face and blushing cheeks.

She is a lovely creature.

"Margaret," Mary said, "what do you think of Ann's dress?" Mary touched one of the puffy satin sleeves tightened near the elbows with tiny dark-blue ribbons.

"You have finished it." Margaret pulled her lips in. She should have noticed, but to admire material indulgences of the day didn't often come into her mind. "Ann, the frock becomes you, as if *you* were made for *it*. The lightness of the blue matches your eyes."

Jane, larger boned, sturdily built, yet timid as a bird, leaned nearer. Her hazelnut hair caught golden light from the fire. She whispered, "We've been waiting to hear about your afternoon in Stratford."

Mary scowled and put her finger to her lips.

"Jane, in my bedroom chest I have some yardage of golden silk, which would create a stunning gown for you. You may have it." Margaret nodded toward the men. "Tell me what you know of the matter in this room."

The three sisters started whispering at once. Margaret discerned little from their murmurs. She held up her hands to quiet them and then nodded to Mary.

Mary, taller than the other two, pushed an errant dark brown curl behind her ear. Her wide, hazel eyes with long dark lashes flashed toward the men. "They discuss maps and something entailing colonization of the New World—again."

Margaret sighed. Her father's comment about "nothing new" ended her curiosity.

Pursell entered with numerous bottles of recently acquired French wine. Crissa followed, carrying a tray of engraved goblets. She set them on the wood-

en-inlaid table near the couches and high-back chairs surrounding the fireplace. Pursell filled each goblet, while Crissa served everyone.

Margaret slid into the crimson and copper brocaded chair by the hearth, sipped, and let the flames burn away the privation of pleasantries from this day.

"Gentlemen, let us take our ease." Her father motioned them toward the fireplace.

With drinks in hand, the men broke from their tight circle and joined the ladies, finding seats near the hearth. Lord Calvert held his wine goblet high and cleared his throat, preparing to make a toast.

"Here's to a world unexplored, the darkness of ignorance, and to the bold who dare bring us light."

Everyone, in good cheer, agreed and sipped.

"Cousin Cecil," Margaret gave him a smile to show no ill will. "Your toast reminisces of something written by our prolific late Stratford neighbor, William."

He laughed, then held his wine toward her. "They call me a learned man, but you've caught me assembling and twisting pieces of Shakespeare's works for mine own use."

Margaret considered Cousin Cecil's appearance rather mundane in that he borrowed the style of all the prominent men. He, like the other men and women of title, selected their dashing attire to impress. She suppressed a smile. Her brothers and father did no less. There must be some law requiring men and women of means to flaunt their status by the lavish costumes they elected to wear.

Cecil had wisely shunned the high-collared ruff of his father's generation in favor of the cutwork display of the current flat-linen collar. His mossy-green silk doublet, embroidered with scrolls of golden-brown and pink-rose threads, emphasized his slashed sleeves, which in turn showed his ivory silk shirt beneath.

This did make him appear powerful and intelligent. As a barrister of The Honorable Society of Grey's Inn, he embodied the concept of integrity.

Regardless, this visit could not be dismissed as social. Her distant cousin always came with a plan. Margaret fingered her goblet and guessed as to what disruptive words he would present to her father. Of course, Cecil would claim his proposal to consist of pure logic.

She could pick her younger brother Giles's spirited voice from the several conversations saying, "What a ghastly experience when I sailed with your father from Newfoundland to Jamestown a little over what? Ten years ago, at least. Not only did we battle the elements, scrounged for food and shelter, but clearly, as Catholics, were not in the least welcomed. However, for the fun of it, I would do so again."

"Quite a time." Cecil chuckled. "Father rued his Newfoundland debacle along with the travesty of showing up in the Virginia Colony. He complained about it for years to follow." Cecil nodded toward the large round table. "Remember the area I showed you—on the map north of the Virginia Colony. It holds a great deal of promise and hasn't been colonized."

And here he presents the reason for his visit—again. Bored, Margaret stared into the fire and sipped.

"Lord Baltimore," Edward spoke in his deliberate, slow manner, "you must

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worry about the danger in all this sailing back and forth across the Atlantic. Everyone on your father's sailing ships experienced quite a scare the year the *Dove* sailed off and separated from the *Ark*. They all thought it doomed, and then years later the ship your stepmother—forgive me." He flushed and glanced at others' reactions. "I didn't mean to be insensitive."

Edward, tall, awkward, soft spoken, and hesitant to try anything new, believed anyone foolish enough to leave their homeland would encounter death.

Cecil appeared to have responded to this half-question many times. He didn't hesitate. "No apology necessary, Edward. Your concerns are just. Only a fool would say the sea imposes no risks. My stepmother and many good people died returning to our homeland because of unfortunate events. A storm and the rocks off the coast of Ireland would cause any experienced crew concern, but some speculate the captain may have suffered an incapacitating illness, bringing on poor judgement. We're talking of two ships here, but can you count how many ships have sailed the passage without harm?"

Fulke, the eldest and shortest brother, spoke. "Cecil, I know you have an urgent purpose for coming here tonight. Your carriage and horse stand unattended outside our door, you've arrived unannounced, and all the while your manners cause you to bide your time to play the social card."

"Fulke's right." Richard said. "Please, you may dispense with the formalities, Cecil, and get on with whatever concerns you."

Cecil surveyed the faces staring back at him. He leaned forward and fondled his clean-shaven chin.

After a brief hesitation, he said, "Your family may be under the scrutiny of the king. If you've a way to hear the latest news, and you already know these things, then I hope to God you're making plans. However, I suspect living so far away you haven't heard the terribleness of it all. Since King Charles dissolved Parliament, he's ruling uncontrolled."

Richard held his hand up for Cecil to stop talking. Her father stood. "Dary, stoke the fire once more, then you may retire after you ask Pip to attend Lord Baltimore's horse and carriage." Margaret understood her father's desire to keep whatever Cecil might say within the family. She nodded to Crissa, dismissing her for the evening.

"Will you be wanting more wine, your Lord?" Pursell removed the empty bottles.

"Thank you, Pursell. Please leave the other bottles on the table."

Richard made some superfluous comments until the door shut behind the butler, house boy, and the young maid. Margaret's brothers huddled in their own conversation.

Richard scowled. "The king's eye falls on my family because Catherine, Eleanor, and Elizabeth have become nuns, a clear statement about the family's distasteful view of the Church of England. My daughters must do what's in their hearts." He sighed. "The obvious is the obvious. My sons and my attendance at church seem no longer enough to placate the crown."

Giles nodded to his brothers. "You can wager our fines won't be enough to satisfy the crown either. The Brent estates are in danger—"

Their father scoffed. "I have protected my lands from the king's sequestration. Admington and Stoke have safely been signed over to relatives."

"Father," Fulke said, "your fourteen-year lease to protect Lark Stoke ended last year."

"Ah, time, time, time." Richard shrugged. "I have other lands the king can take for his damnable two thirds."

Lord Baltimore shifted in his chair, flexing his fingers. "There's more. Your name sake Richard and his writings—it pains me to say he'll no longer be fined, but next imprisoned."

Margaret watched Cecil start to say something else—instead he took a sip of wine.

He believes prison may not be the worst of what might happen to Richard.

Cecil glanced up at Margaret. After a moment, he set his goblet down, strode over, and took Margaret's hand. Holding it gently, he stared down at her, looked at her father and brothers, then cleared his throat, probably full of words he didn't want to say.

"Dear lady, some tell me they fear for your safety." He lowered his voice. "Rumors say since the Pope banned Mary Ward's institution, you've now taken up the call and are visiting Catholics in hiding."

Richard cocked his head. "What's this you say? Mary Ward?"

Margaret's blood chilled.

If he knew the whole of it, the mathematical and Latin lessons, the reading of the actual bible instead of prayer books sanctioned for women—gathering in the homes to sew and study.

"Margaret," Cecil said, "consider your family. If certain people hear of this all your lives will be in peril. Your family, nor I, would wish to see you swing from the gallows."