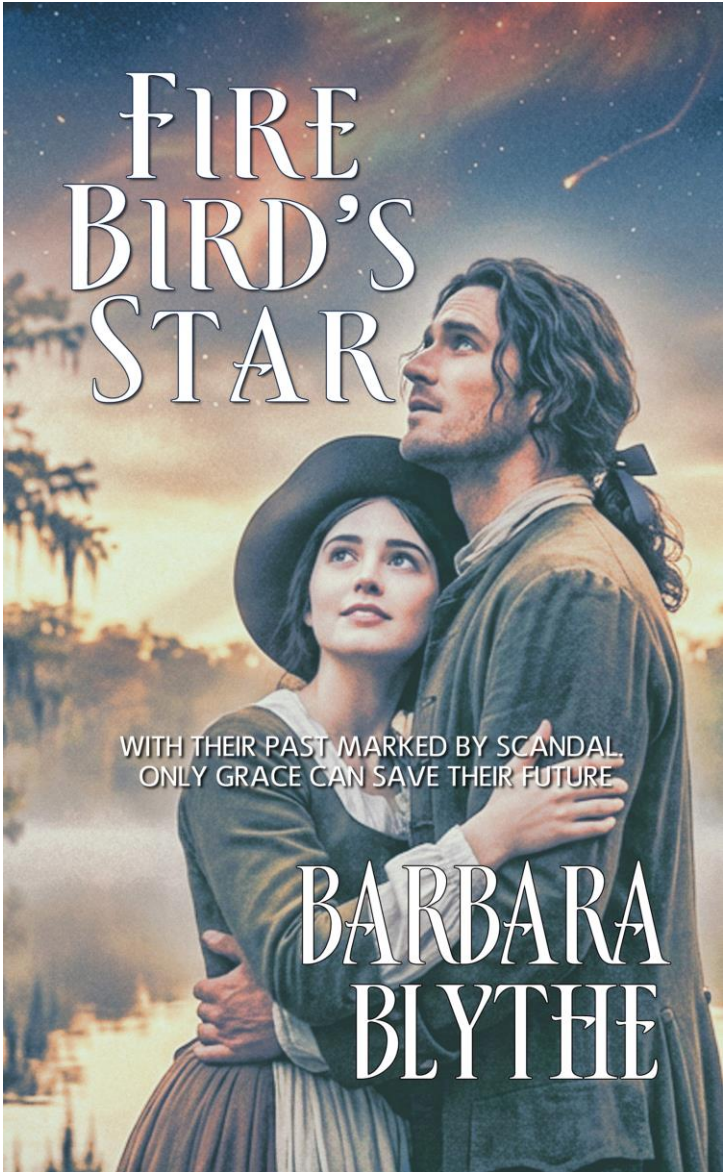


The book cover features a romantic scene between a man and a woman in historical attire. The man, with long dark hair and a beard, wears a dark coat and a white cravat, looking up at the sky. The woman, wearing a large black hat and a dark dress with a white collar, looks up at him. They are embracing. The background is a sunset or sunrise over a body of water with palm trees. A shooting star is visible in the dark sky above them.

FIRE BIRD'S STAR

WITH THEIR PAST MARKED BY SCANDAL,
ONLY GRACE CAN SAVE THEIR FUTURE

BARBARA
BLYTHE

Fire Bird's Star

Barbara Blythe

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

To my late husband, Barry, who always supported my writing. I love and miss you and wish you were here to share in my writing journey.

What People are Saying

Fire Dragon's Angel

Set in both England and a turbulent early US, this story is wonderfully written. The characters leap to life from the page. Full of emotionally charged moments...(it) will keep you spell bound through its pages. ~ Happily Ever After Reviews

Blythe's writing is engaging and she's a good story teller...Blythe won't disappoint. ~ You Gotta Read Reviews

To colonial era lovers everywhere, this is a must read! ~ Diana Flow-reviewer

CHAPTER 1

LOWER NORFOLK COUNTY
VIRGINIA COLONY: ON THE
FRINGES OF THE GREAT DISMAL SWAMP
MAY, 1677

"The trouble, Lissie, is that they both want to marry you."

Despair winged painfully beneath Lissie Carruthers's ribcage while her stomach knotted, unrelated to her constricting stays.

Fortunately, her cousin's gaze was focused on the road leading to River Haven. Lorna Warren held the reins, competent and comfortable with guiding the horse and wagon.

Lissie had no wish to marry either man. Given her unpardonable behavior several months earlier, she feared God would sentence her to spinsterhood. Exactly what she deserved. "I've no plans to wed."

"Lissie Carruthers—you're well on your way to spins..." Cousin Lorna bit her lower lip, falling silent. The late afternoon was filled with the warble of birds, the swish of the nearby creek, and the clop of the horse's hooves. Lorna, near two score in age, was possessed of china-blue eyes bracketed by tiny crinkles. Her dark hair was sparsely threaded with

silver although she exuded a youthful vitality. Cousin Lorna was the perfect help-meet to Reverend Thomas Warren, and loved by all in the Dismal Swamp community. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't question your choices."

As Lissie stared ahead, the scent of wisteria and wild honeysuckle invaded her disquiet. How could she tell her kinswoman what she truly wanted but was never to be hers given the disaster she'd brought about. While trying to make the one man she truly cared for jealous, she'd made a fool of herself, earning banishment from her home.

How she missed her father and Carrumont, nestled in Surry County near the James River. She also missed the man with sage green eyes who possessed an enchantingly irresistible grin. Sighing, Lissie brushed back a lock of ebony hair tugged free by the light breeze. "I will only wed a man I love and who loves me. I want to be his equal—not a silent ornament condemned to a mindless existence. Dr. Parry wants a woman who will reinforce his questionably obtained social status. And poor Widower Larkin needs a housekeeper and nurse maid. Though I'm sympathetic to the widower's plight, I could never love him. How could you think either suitable?"

Lissie lowered her gaze to the basket she held filled with a half-dozen loaves of bread she'd baked. A year ago she would have laughed if someone had told her she'd be baking her own bread in a cottage surrounded by a swamp.

"Alexander Parry is educated," Cousin Lorna said.

"Perhaps puffed up, but he owns the largest farm in lower Norfolk County and has a fine stable. He's attractive."

If one can ignore the inflated ego.

Lorna continued. "And Luke Larkin may not be handsome, but he's kind and considerate, and he loves those babes. Pity him losing Abigail when the last one was born."

Lissie's irritation softened as she thought of the gaunt man with the six-month old boy and two-and-a-half-year-old girl, the three always present for Sabbath service. Guilt assailed as the enormity of the man's heartbreak settled in the pit of her uneasy stomach. Lissie often wished she possessed the serenity and sweet spirit of the late Abigail Larkin.

"Mr. Larkin has tremendous responsibility with two small ones and a mercantile to manage."

Lissie shifted the basket before speaking. "Rachel Owen is enamored of him."

"He only has eyes for you, Lissie. Thomas has oft commented Luke pays more attention to you than the sermon on the Sabbath."

"Cousin, can we speak of something else?" Exasperation sharpened Lissie's tone. Had she forgotten flares of intemperance always landed her in trouble?

"I was hoping you might find happiness."

"I would be very happy if we deliver this bread to River Haven without mishap," Lissie said. She refused to give another thought to her marital status. Yes, she was a score and three, but hardly ready to be put to

pasture.

"As you wish. I would hope six loaves will be enough for tonight. How kind of Dr. Parry to include us in his gathering."

"The vicar and his wife should be invited."

"There are always those who would rather not be reminded God is watching."

"I once believed I could handle my affairs much better than anyone—both on earth and in Heaven. How mistaken I was."

"Well, I thank God He sent you to us. What a joy having you here has been. We'll miss you dreadfully when you return to Carrumont."

No time soon, I'll wager. Lissie pushed against the threatening despondency and changed the subject. "I hope I'm dressed appropriately."

"Of course you are. You look lovely."

Lissie glanced down at her skirts, running a hand over the delicately embroidered flowers adorning the blue silk. No one would care what she was wearing, including Alexander Parry and Luke Larkin. She opened her mouth to give voice to her thought when she realized they had turned onto the long, oyster shell drive of River Haven. The residence was impressive with its white-washed wooden siding, intricate brickwork, and fireplaces flanking both ends. Other guests were already entering the stately manor.

"There's Thomas." Lorna nodded to their side at the man wearing a flat hat, Lissie's late mother's first cousin. Having seen them, he hurried their way. Twoscore and five in age, tall and raw-boned, Cousin

Thomas possessed the energy of a man half his age. He was truly dedicated to the Lord, joyfully spreading Christ's message of love, redemption, and forgiveness. Lissie wondered why Cousin Thomas was almost at a run, his faded red queue flapping up and down.

"Wondrous, marvelous news, wife and fair cousin. My prayers have been answered."

Lorna halted the horse. "Calm down husband, and breathe deeply. You look close to exploding. Climb up and drive us the rest of the way."

Lissie placed the basket behind her in the wagon, sliding over to make room for Lorna while Thomas climbed up and took the reins. Excitement radiated from the man.

"Why are you in such a state, Thomas?" Lorna took hold of his arm as he urged the horse forward. Still breathless, he inhaled deeply.

"This morning when I suggested you and Lissie meet me here this evening, I feared my meeting with the vestrymen would run late. But we completed matters with time to spare. I was about to depart Mr. Larkin's store—we assembled near his storage cabin where there are shaded benches—when the miracle happened." Thomas paused, drawing another deep breath. "You know how I've been hoping to find someone to help me reach all the members of the parish."

Families in the area were spread far and wide throughout the sprawling swamp, an area often referred to as dismal, though Lissie thought it beautiful and unspoiled. The natives referred to it as the "green

sea" marsh. Dismal Village, where the majority of residents lived, was a minor commercial hub for many who traveled between the St. Bride's Parish community and the ship building plantation to the north on the Elizabeth River. Those journeying between the Virginia and northern Carolina colony often passed through, as well.

Not so very long ago, Lissie would have died of boredom in such a rustic place. She almost did until she discovered she wasn't the most important person in the world and realized she could actually be of use.

"I've found such a soul today."

"Where? How?" Lorna asked.

"When I was bidding Luke goodbye at the mercantile. A man entered. Tall, commanding, but friendly of face. I nodded, as did he. Then Luke's Clara came dashing 'round the corner—I tell you the fellow needs a wife to control the lass—and ran into the man. I fully expected the new arrival to chastise the energetic child. Instead, he laughed, scooped her up, and placed her on his shoulder. He said, 'You're in a hurry.' Clara nodded her head, mesmerized by the strapping gentleman. 'You're far too pretty to rush about. How will a young man ever catch you?'

"Everyone laughed—the place was full, you see—Dr. Parry was there—and when the newcomer set Clara down she hid behind her father. Introductions were made and conversation commenced. I then discovered this man was divinely sent. He attended Exeter and lacks but minimal training before qualifying for ordination. He admitted drifting from the Father,

but has a deep yearning to repair his ways. I believe if I make some contacts and write a few letters, we could have another rector in our midst. Those in and around the Great Dismal won't have to wait for my bi-monthly visit."

Now arrived at River Haven, talk faded, though Lissie heard Thomas mention something about James Cittie, and Lorna responded with "such a shame."

Two servants assisted them from the wagon, Thomas and Lorna discussing "the journey to England for ordination," which meant nothing to her. Thomas retrieved Lissie's basket and Lorna handed a servant her prized porcelain tureen containing the soup she'd promised Dr. Parry's housekeeper she'd bring. As they neared the house, awash in the glow from the light of window candles, Lorna resumed her calm demeanor and a soft smile touched her lips. Thomas mentioned the man he'd met earlier at Larkin's would be present at the night's gala, as well.

Approaching the manor, Lissie's gaze swept the expanse sloping down to one of the deeper streams feeding into the southern branch of the Elizabeth River. Lissie had heard Alexander Parry had imported his domestic help from England, and fifty enslaved Africans worked his tobacco fields. Lissie's father owned no slaves, and like their neighbor, Latimer Kirkleigh, owner of Tidelands, used indentured and paid laborers to keep Carrumont running. Lissie couldn't imagine why anyone would need to own a person.

Promptly greeted by the dark-skinned, liveried

footman, Lissie and her cousins were ushered through the lofty entryway, papered with scenes of tranquil gardens and floored with burnished cherry. As Lissie examined walls hung with hunting scenes and lighted by gilded sconces, she noticed a man with dark, wavy hair farther down the hall. As he perused the painting before him, she made note of his attire, the forest green velvet coat and cream satin breeches accentuating his powerful frame and height. Something caused him to turn, his gaze meeting hers. As he walked toward her, vague snatches of Dr. Parry's welcome of her cousins floated around her. Acutely aware etiquette required her to turn and greet her host, Lissie's gaze fixed upon the approaching man. A man unnervingly familiar. When an insouciant grin lit his face, her breathing shortened, her pulse raced, her head swam. Surely she was imagining—it couldn't be—she'd taken leave of her senses—

"So our paths cross again. How fare you, Phyllis?"

Talons of horror clasped her, and turning abruptly, Lissie rushed to the front entrance, only to be stopped when she ran into someone. Looking up, she saw Luke Larkin. The talons dug deeper.

~*~

Torrence Willshire halted when the owner of the local mercantile slipped an arm around Phyllis Carruthers's shoulder. Tall and thin, the man's pale countenance was accentuated by his white-blond hair and light blue eyes. He presented such a startling

contrast to Phyllis with her naturally golden skin and shimmering black hair. Phyllis apologized for her clumsiness, and then extricated herself. Larkin—he'd heard the man's name during his fortuitous meeting in the mercantile with the Dismal's vicar—murmured something unintelligible and seemed most pleased Phyllis had nearly knocked him down. Larkin extended his arm, and Phyllis hesitated a moment as she looked in his direction. As soon as her gaze met his, she quickly accepted Larkin's proffered arm, her action intentional. Torr would bide his time. Yet disappointment knotted in the pit of his stomach.

Torr was about to resume his perusal of Alexander Parry's impressive art collection when Rev. Warren hailed him. The man rushed up to him, a woman at his side, sweet faced, somewhat rounded in figure, and exuding warmth. Grasping his hand, Thomas Warren's shake was firm and effusive.

"Good to see you again, Mr. Willshire. I know we've much to speak of, but I have no intention of intruding upon your enjoyment of tonight's festivities. I would like to meet at the church in the morning. This is my wife, Lorna. Lorna, this is Torrence Willshire, the gentleman I was telling you about."

"Welcome to our village, Mr. Willshire." Lorna extended her hand, and Torr bent over in the courtly manner drilled in him since nursery days at Sturbridge Court. Lorna Warren beamed. "My, you're quite the gentleman."

"Please don't show me up as the country bumpkin, sir." Rev. Warren pleaded. "There'll be no

living with my wife. I'm sure Dr. Parry has seen to your every comfort?"

"He has. And generously offered me a room until things are more certain. Then I hope to search for a place of my own."

"Mr. Willshire, please consider yourself our guest for breakfast in the morning before Thomas talks your ear off."

Torr laughed. "I gratefully accept."

"You'll have an opportunity to meet our cousin who is visiting," Mrs. Warren said. "Thomas tells me you recently left James Cittie. Were you present during Nathaniel Bacon's attack?"

"When I departed, the city was in turmoil. Gov. Berkeley refused to consider any negotiation with Nathaniel Bacon. The situation convinced me to resign my post as aide to Sir William. I've heard troops arrived in January of this year, but Berkeley had already reclaimed the capital after the death of Bacon last fall. I've heard Berkeley has been replaced."

"How sad you lost your position, but how marvelous you're here," Rev. Warren said. "I believe you mentioned you hoped to visit an old friend in the area." The man smiled. "Have you re-established your acquaintance?"

"Not exactly. I sighted the individual only a few minutes ago." Torr craned his neck, but there was no sign of Phyllis. Had Larkin convinced her to walk with him in Dr. Parry's garden? Upon arriving, Torr had glimpsed the profusion of flowers and shrubs affording enticing privacy. Too much privacy. Was

Phyllis still the consummate flirt? His stomach knotted tighter. He'd hoped she might be different after the matter involving Latimer and Ceresia.

"I might know the individual," Lorna said. "What is the name?"

"Mistress Phyllis Carruthers of Carrumont."

Rev. and Mistress Warren looked at one another, and then surprised him with peals of laughter.

"You have indeed come to the right place," Rev. Warren said. "She's our visiting cousin. But we call her Lissie, as did her mother. Merrimas Warren Carruthers's father was brother to my father. You might gather Lissie's mother was born on Christmas Day."

"So Mistress Carruthers—Phyllis—Lissie—lives with you?" *Thank you, Lord. Now, I might have a chance to convince her I truly care—*

"There you are, Mr. Willshire." Alexander Parry approached, resplendent in his brocade and satin. "I was hoping to introduce you to the woman I plan to wed. Come."

Promising Rev. Warren he'd return shortly, Torr followed his host. He'd met many men like Alexander Parry—obsessed with gain and status to the point of boorishness. He couldn't honestly assess the man's doctoring skills having only met him earlier in the day. But upon discovering Torr was the son of the Earl of Sturbridge, the doctor had readily extended his hospitality and an offer of lodging. Why, Torr couldn't imagine. As second to the youngest of the earl's progeny—four sons all total—and a reputed

incorrigible troublemaker, Torr commanded no importance. Parry would be wasting his time befriending him should he anticipate an advantageous connection. Besides, Torr hadn't communicated with his father since the morning he boarded the ship bound for James Cittie five years earlier. Their rift would not be easily mended.

As Parry led him through the guests, most as sumptuously attired as their host and certainly residents from across the river, the man paused frequently to make introductions. They eventually joined a group clustered about someone he couldn't see but whose feminine laughter seemed familiar. As those surrounding the unseen female parted, all eyes fixed upon him and Parry. Then Torr's gaze riveted upon the revealed woman.

"Why have you been hiding?" Parry addressed Lissie as though she was a child.

Her gaze darkened to icy pewter.

"Mr. Willshire, may I present to you Mistress Phyllis Carruthers of Carrumont in Surry. I am going to convince her to become my wife. Perhaps you will aid me in my efforts?"

CHAPTER 2

Fury consumed Lissie at Dr. Parry's offensive proclamation, banishing the breathless panic caused by the appearance of Torrence Willshire. Directing her gaze and her words to the doctor, she ignored Torrence. Partially. There was no overlooking his height or the breadth of his shoulders. Or avoiding the bergamot and sandalwood scenting his flesh. She couldn't look at him. She would unravel.

"Dr. Parry, you shouldn't tease." Her words were laced with mocking reproof. "Think of all the hearts you're breaking. And Mr. Willshire couldn't possibly aid you. He's already tried to convince me to marry him. And failed."

If she'd hoped to anger Torrence, she was disappointed. He laughed. Actually laughed. Then had the temerity to take her hand and place a kiss on the back. Fire raced along her arm and seized her chest. The breathlessness returned. What if she fainted? She'd never fainted—how did one feel? Panic threatened again.

"You have exposed me, Mistress Carruthers. How wonderful to see you again."

"You know one another?" Parry was confused as he looked first at her and then at Torrence.