

# Riverbend

## Chapter One

Damaris allowed the pink roses she had just clipped to spill from her hands, droplets of dew sprinkling unnoticed onto the polished heart-of-pine floor. She had come from the garden, humming to herself, and was certain she had misunderstood the words her father said on her entrance into the room—a room she had thought to be empty.

“What?” she stammered. “Papa, what...?”

“I have decided you will marry Matthew Pope,” Anthony Tilghman repeated in an impatient tone.

“Married? Today? This morning?” She didn’t recognize the shrill voice as her own.

“Since he is here, and the preacher is here, it might as well be today. Come stand by Mr. Pope and we shall get it done.”

Papa stood in front of the sideboard with his friend, Matthew Pope, and another man, a nervous, ill-kempt person of middle years who had stayed overnight on his way to White’s Store, a community several miles to the west. Papa introduced him as the Reverend Spivey. The preacher looked like a rabbit in a snare, his eyes searching frantically for escape. He probably had not expected to pay for his bed and meal by conducting a wedding before he continued his journey.

Matthew Pope had also arrived the evening before to play cards, and had been pressed to stay when too many bottles of brandy had been emptied. Damaris had thought to avoid both men by eating an early breakfast in her room and slipping away to the

garden until they were gone. Now the eggs and toast threatened to rise in her throat. When had this been decided? At cards, last night? Over coffee, this morning? No matter, it was too soon, too sudden.

“I’m not ready,” she faltered, her gaze flickering from one man to the other. “My gown...” None of the three seemed inclined to rescue her.

Matthew Pope moved then, swooping down to retrieve the flowers she had dropped. He handed them to her without the trace of a smile.

At a nod from his host, the Reverend Spivey produced a Bible from somewhere and opened it. “Shall we begin?”

Papa nodded and fixed her with his stern gaze. She dared not disobey. She repeated the vows through numb lips, Mr. Pope looking bored, Reverend Spivey extremely uneasy, and her father with a feverish glitter in his eyes. Afterward, she watched as her maid, Pearlie, packed her clothes along with her hair ribbons, gloves and hats. Pearlie was crying, her face twisted in grief, and Damaris determined not to look at her lest she start to cry, too. Mama had always said you mustn’t let the servants sense your emotions.

Then the boxes were placed on the back of a wagon and she was lifted to a seat on the front. Damaris twisted around to see if the boxes holding her belongings were secure. She blinked back tears as she realized what she had been forced to leave behind—her mother’s jewels and the set of china that had been promised to her when she got married. She turned to wave goodbye to her father, only to see him disappear inside the house. Blinking back tears, she resorted to staring straight ahead, wondering if she dared jump

off the wagon and run home, convinced that a terrible mistake had been made and all would be corrected once her father realized it.

But, Papa never made mistakes. He had warned her several times in the past few weeks that he was determined to see her married. It was as if he expected some catastrophe to happen to himself, and Damaris shuddered in spite of the warmth of the mid-day sun. It was her own fault he had chosen Mr. Pope, for she had dithered over the choices he had presented, unable to decide. Papa was like that: if you couldn't make up your mind, he made it up for you.

She tried to remember all she knew about Mr. Pope. When she was about five years old, Papa and Mama had visited Mr. and Mrs. Pope at their farm. The men had talked business while Mama and Mrs. Pope visited. Damaris remembered that Mrs. Pope was very pretty. She had given Damaris a handful of sugared pecans and had laughed when Mama complained about her sticky fingers. The thought of the pecans made her stomach growl. Breakfast was hours in the past and it didn't look as if Mr. Pope was going to stop anywhere. She wished now she had told Pearlie to slip a few biscuits into her reticule.

She tried to draw Mr. Pope out by asking questions about Riverbend, but after receiving one-word answers, she gave in to the sights she saw on the way to her new home, pushing aside all thoughts of what might happen once they arrived. This day had had to come sooner or later, even if it had come sooner than she liked and not the way she had expected. Nor had she expected her father's dour friend to be her bridegroom. The pretty, laughing lady had died shortly after their visit, and years later, when she questioned her mother after one of Mr. Pope's visits at their table, she had learned that

the woman she recalled was his second wife, making him a widower twice over. Damaris shivered. And now she was wife number three. Her hunger was forgotten as she considered this fact.

Riverbend was as she remembered: a large, somewhat rambling house that had obviously been added onto over the years, outbuildings that she later learned were the stables, barn and storage sheds, several small cabins she assumed belong to the slaves, a brick kitchen and another small brick building with barred windows which purpose she could guess at. Beyond the house, fields were planted in rows of the cotton plants that were the pride of Anson County, the long, fine strands far superior to any other in North Carolina

Mr. Pope, as she called him in her mind, assisted her from the wagon and she smoothed her skirts before following him inside. The interior of the white clapboard house was cool, a relief after the heat of the September sunshine. An unsmiling woman stood by the door; her calico dress and white apron Simoned her as a slave although her proud demeanor and creamy complexion more closely resembled one of the society wives who had been her mother's friends. She looked at Damaris in surprise, her fine brows arched.

"This is my wife, Damaris Tilghman, Missus Pope now," Matthew said. He didn't mention the slave's name and Damaris wasn't sure how to respond.

"Your wife? When did this happen?" the woman asked with a lilting accent that was at odds with her stern appearance. She took a step back. "Did you win her at cards?"

"Show her to her room and help her unpack," Matthew said not answering her questions. He strode across the floor without looking to see if his orders were obeyed.

The woman stiffened, her eyes flashing angrily. "I will call Bessie. She can help you," she said to the air above Damaris' head. She turned and followed her master.

Left alone, Damaris could only wait. Finally, a younger woman came in and said in wonder, "Land, is you the bride? We never knew Massa Pope be getting' married! You come along wid me, Missus, and old Bessie get you settled."

Damaris followed Bessie up the wide stairway, thinking that this slave was nowhere near old, but appeared instead to be about her own age. She was also decidedly fat, and gasped for breath as her foot met each stair. She beckoned her new mistress to a large, sunny room and said, "I'se go see about your luggage and t'ings."

Left alone again, Damaris looked about the room. It was clean and inviting, with a small bed covered in a white counterpane, embroidered with blue violets across the top. There was a chair upholstered in blue and white toile and a pretty little table that held a pitcher and basin. Several candlesticks of varying designs and sizes were lined up on the mantel of the small fireplace. White muslin curtains fluttered in the breeze from an open window, and sunlight poured a golden path across the bare floor.

Although she waited, no one came back. Afraid that she might be summoned at any moment, she dared not leave the room to explore. Where had Bessie gone? And where was Mr. Pope? Why had he married her, if only to leave her without a word in a strange house?

She lay on the bed, trying to forget how hungry and alone she felt. Eventually, she fell asleep. When the sunlight turned to shadow she awoke, thinking for a few blissful seconds that she was in her own room and had had a dreadful dream.

A knock on the door told her that this was no nightmare.

“Come in,” she quavered.

The door opened. It was the tall woman who had met her at the door. “Mr. Pope is waiting for you to join him at dinner,” she said, her tone conveying that Damaris was thoughtless, if not rude, for her delay.

“Oh! I’ll be right there.” Damaris looked wildly around. While she had been sleeping, her boxes and bags had been deposited on the floor. She went through one, then another, looking for her hairbrush while the woman waited unhelpfully, her slim body taut with impatience. Giving up, Damaris tugged her fingers through her hair and pulled it back, retying the ribbon that bound it.

She followed the slave downstairs and into the dining room, where Mr. Pope sat at the head of the table. He, however, didn’t seem to mind having to wait. He sent her a tight smile and indicated the chair opposite him with a nod of his head. As soon as she sat down, he began eating.

Damaris looked at the plate of fried chicken and overcooked greens without appetite, although earlier she had been starving. While she had slept, the day had edged closer to night and the unknown. She was not entirely ignorant of what was to come, and her stomach clenched in protest.

She picked at a piece of coarse bread while Mr. Pope polished off his plate with evident relish. The room was dim, the curtains having been drawn against the late afternoon sun. Heavy furniture made of some dark wood was placed around the walls like sentries. She could make out pieces of silver and porcelain arranged on a lowboy at the end of the room. A matching highboy stood at the other end. The candles placed at the center of the table dripped and sputtered, causing fantastic shadows to flit around the two

diners. Occasionally a silent woman Damaris had not yet met came in and poured more coffee into their cups. She would have preferred milk, but did not dare request it.

“So, are you settled in satisfactorily?” Matthew Pope inquired after wiping his mouth with a piece of linen and pushing his chair back.

“Yes, I suppose. I will need help unpacking,” she said, trying to meet his eyes and failing. “The boxes were just left on the floor.” She meant to tell him of her annoyance at having her privacy invaded while she slept, but he interrupted.

“I will have Bessie come to you later. You can tell her what you want done,” he said carelessly.

“I have met Bessie. And who is the other woman? The one who was at the door?”

“Zoë is my housekeeper. You don’t need to trouble your head about her.”

Damaris folded her hands in her lap to still their nervous tattoo. “Then, sir, what will be my duties in this house?”

He looked amused. “Why, you will have none, for Zoë handles the meals and the housecleaning, the laundry ...” At her expression of confusion, he added, “Well, I suppose you can read well enough. My late wife amassed a collection of the kinds of books you women seem to like. I gathered this morning that you like flowers. The garden is badly overgrown. My wife—my first wife—planted it, but it has been neglected since her death. Perhaps that will be enough to keep you busy until—” He broke off, not elaborating his sentence.

Until when—or what? Damaris wondered.

He stood then, and she had no choice but rise as well. “I’m going to my study and go over my accounts,” he said. “I shall see you in the morning, or perhaps not—I rise early. Good night.”

“Good night,” she echoed to his vanishing back. She started back to her room, but changed her mind, deciding instead to explore the house she was now to call home. A door from the dining room led to a small parlor, somewhat dusty and unused-looking,

with another door leading to the hall. On the other side of the hall, the floor polished to a satiny gold, was another, larger room with three walls lined with bookshelves. This room looked more lived-in, the chairs comfortably rumpled, with small tables scattered about to hold a cup of tea or perhaps a stronger drink if company were present. There were two smaller rooms, both doors shut. She did not open either, for one might be Mr. Pope’s study and she didn’t want to interrupt him. Another door at the end of the hall was also shut, and she guessed that led it outside to the stillroom, laundry, and kitchen. Again, she hesitated, but did not open it. There would be time tomorrow. Suddenly, in spite of her nap, she felt incredibly weary.

She climbed the stairs, taking note of an open door at the end of the hall. A quick inspection showed her a set of narrow steps. The slaves would use this passageway to avoid passing a family member on the main stairway. She briefly wondered how Bessie managed to navigate them.

There were four closed doors including hers, two on each side of the narrow hallway, and she wondered which was Mr. Pope’s. Knowing he was in the study, she dared open the doors to the remaining three rooms. The one adjacent to hers was made up



as a sitting room and she noticed a door connecting the two. She was unable to make out any details in the fading light, and she closed the door gently.

Across the hall, she found that the smaller room held only a cot and an armoire. A peek inside showed it to be full of ladies' dresses, musty-smelling and decidedly dusty, she thought as she stifled a sneeze. A pile of rugs lay against one wall, and several boxes were piled against another. This room was used to store unwanted things, then. Why were they not just thrown away or kept in one of the many sheds outside?

Before leaving, she saw a cradle next to the boxes. Perhaps this room had been meant for a nursery. She shut the door and went to the last room. This door, too, opened easily as she lifted the latch. This was surely Mr. Pope's bedroom. The bed was large and high, with a small stepstool at the head to assist in climbing up. A larger, more ornate armoire was centered on the wall opposite the windows, which, like those in the dining room and library, were hidden by heavy draperies. A shaving stand and mirror, and a straight-backed chair completed the furnishings.

When she left the room, she was startled to see Zoë standing in the hallway. Before she could think of anything to say, the woman turned and disappeared down the narrow stairway, her footsteps sounding like the slow beat of a receding drum.

Her heart beating a skittering rhythm of its own, she went to her room, which she had begun to think of as a place of refuge. Bessie was folding her gowns and underclothes in a chest at the end of the bed; her every day and Sunday bonnets hung neatly on two pegs on the wall.

"Can I get you anything, Missus Pope?" Bessie asked, her voice kind.

“Yes.” Relieved to see a friendly face, Damaris smiled back. “I really would like a bath. Can you have some water heated and the tub brought in? And some towels? And did you see a little cake of perfumed soap among my things? It was a Christmas gift.” She stopped, realizing that she was babbling.

“A bath?” Bessie looked puzzled, as if she had never heard such an outlandish notion.

“Yes.” Damaris waited for a nod of understanding.

“I will have to ask Zoë,” Bessie said after thinking for several seconds.

“You do not have to ask Zoë. I am mistress here, and I want a bath. Please see to it, Bessie.”

“Yessum.” Bessie looked doubtful, but she left without saying anything more. While she waited, Damaris managed to unfasten her gown, fumbling with the little hooks on the back. Where, oh where, was Pearlie? Papa should have sent her along; she had been with her almost since she could walk. Pearlie would know how to handle these strangely reluctant slaves.

She looked in the chest for her nightgown and found her brushes and the soap. After about an hour, during which she refolded and replaced her clothing, Bessie came back with two other women who were carrying kettles of steaming water. Bessie motioned, and a third came in dragging a bathing tub almost as big as she was. The water was poured, and all four slaves disappeared. Evidently, Damaris was meant to soap her back by herself.

Angry now, she locked the door and stripped off the rest of her clothes. The water felt soothing, and the perfume given off by the soap seemed to chase away her unease. A

huge Turkish towel was warming on the chair by the fireplace, where someone had lit a fire earlier. Damaris felt the tension of the day evaporate like the steam rising from the tub.

Mr. Pope was old, she thought as she soaped her shapely legs. But not all that old; he was still handsome, in a dark, somewhat brooding way. And, he was one of the more prosperous planters in the county. You could tell the furniture, if unpolished, was of good quality, as were the dishes she had eaten from. Zoë may have been in charge, but she wasn't doing a very good job. Damaris decided she would start slowly, perhaps with the parlor, and when her husband—she blushed at the word—saw the changes for the better that she would make, he would let her gradually take over the rest of the housekeeping from Zoë, who surely had no right to so much authority.

As she bathed, she tried to recall all the things her mother had taught her: which herbs were for healing and which for flavoring food, how to treat a fever and the best way to remove beetles from a carpet.

Luckily, she thought as she rose from the tub and reached for the towel, she had Mama's little book to help her remember. It was what was not written down that she strived to recall.

"Your husband is the head of the household. A good wife is subservient to all his demands. She does not question."

Mama had followed that rule to the letter, Damaris thought now, rubbing the towel over her long hair to dry it. If she had questioned, it had never been in Damaris' hearing.

Mama had had one last instruction, delivered shortly before she died. “The marriage bed will no doubt seem strange to you. You should let your husband instruct you as to what he desires.” The worn, unhappy woman had whispered, “It will hurt at first. Just shut your eyes and think of pleasant things and it will soon be over. Above all, never complain and never deny. It is your duty to please him.”

But *how*, exactly, Damaris wondered as she drew her fine lawn gown over her head. Furthermore, it seemed as if Mr. Pope had no plans on being pleased that night, or any other. Hadn’t he said he would see her in the morning?

She looked in the mirror. Maybe he thought her too young at just sixteen, and had decided to wait. But she couldn’t wait, not if she wanted to get the upper hand over the mysterious Zoë. She had to be mistress in fact as well as word if her orders were to be obeyed.

She was a pawn in this game, she decided, brushing her long hair, so blonde as to be nearly white. She knew perfectly well that this was an advantageous marriage, one that would renew the Tilghman coffers. She had seen the matched team sold and inferior horses placed in the stables. Mama’s diamond brooch, inherited from her grandmother, had disappeared. And, slowly, the more skilled slaves had been sent off to what she hoped were better homes.

She could guess from her mother’s pursed lips and little phrases, caught in passing, what had happened to the family’s fortune. Papa couldn’t pass a cock fight without making a wager. He’d made at least one trip to Charleston to try and recoup his losses, only to return, longer of face and more stooped of shoulder than ever. Mama had shut herself up in her room for a week after that escapade.

Then she had died and the trips stopped. But the damage had been done. Damaris had entertained more than one debt collector, smiling and pouring lemonade, while her father hid in the barns.

There had been only one way to repay the debts and save the family's name. And, the daughter of a gentleman, she knew that value was to be received for value given.

Mr. Pope must not regret his bargain.

She paused a moment, then went resolutely to the door