

READ THE FIRST CHAPTER FROM BOOK FIVE, *REDEMPTION*

Here Comes Martha

Martha Downing rode like a brutally cold wind out of Giles House, through the deserted early morning streets of Boston, and—almost without slowing down—all the way to Briarcliff, stopping at a quiet place in the shadows at the edge of town. She was unaware of the irony that not long before, her nemesis, Faythe Emily Wentworth, was in similar straits, riding alone in the dark thinking vengeful thoughts. But so it was.

Martha, like Faythe before her, was concerned about being recognized. She certainly looked forward to meeting up with Mertens again, but she was confident that the next meeting would be on her own terms and in her own timing. All alone in the middle of the night, with no support? That was not the right time.

Martha quietly slept for a few hours, letting her horse rest, and she was up and on the road before dawn. By early afternoon, she arrived at the Inn at Bearminster.

Paul Josephson was stunned to see her, not to mention the men's clothing she wore, but with lace and bright ruffles peeking out from underneath. "Mrs. Downing!" he fairly shouted in his surprise, until she shushed him with a look, and that terrified him more than a look from an ordinary person would do.

"No one must know I am here," she hissed at him. "Now show me to my room and make arrangements for a very hot, very long bath. Then send my dinner to my room." She looked down at herself with her nose wrinkled and added, "And a change of clothes. I will be off before dawn."

"Yes, ma'am," said Paul, actually bowing, and he hurried to obey her. He knew any subtle or unsubtle attempts to pump Martha Downing for information would end poorly one way or another—she was not like the men he habitually wormed information from.

The next day, early in the morning, Martha was wide awake, feeling like a new woman. It would be expected that the scars of a month of forced and painful sexual activity would leave her worn down and humbled, but it was not so with Martha. Mertens had been completely wrong supposing his actions would “break” her. Martha Downing, not unlike Warner Mertens himself, was unbreakable. She was bubbling and seething with fury like a kettle on a roaring flame. If they had done anything, the ravages of the past month had only made Martha stronger and more implacable.

Martha was indeed the perfect foil for the Downing fortunes, as Thompson Downing had known when he’d approved of her so many years ago. She was relentless and indefatigable, and adversity merely strengthened her.

The only difficult decision, she thought as she woke and calmly contemplated the ceiling for a few minutes, *is who to go after first—the whorehouse, or Faythe, or that tall man, or all at the same time*. She relished the thoughts, fantasizing about what would be done. “Time to get up and going,” she said aloud.

Martha saddled up early and Paul was there to see her off. He hadn’t slept a bit and looked it. At her request, he had found two men going south who were willing, for a pound each, to escort her home. Paul had paid them out of his own pocket, and made a great show of this, attempting to make clear what a great friend of the Downings he was. Martha thanked him properly, but behind her eyes Paul could see that she knew exactly what he was and what he was doing and why. Paul shuddered. Some women were fun to dominate and have his way with, and others were just too scary. Martha was a completely new level.

He breathed a deep breath and blew out through his cheeks in relief when he saw the backs of the three horses and the three riders riding south to North Hinkapee.

It was near day’s end that Martha rode into the gate of the Downings’ farm. She had dismissed her escorts when they reached the town, and she calmly rode alone up the dirt lane, ignoring the open-mouthed stares of all who watched. She stopped before the main house, handed the reins to a servant, and climbed the stairs to the place where she ruled.

“Where is my son?” were her first words to Elmer Smith, who had rushed to the door to greet her.

“Out s’somewhere,” was the nervous response.

“Find him and bring him here,” she said as she strode into her house. Passing the parlor, she went

straight to the study and took her place in the chair behind the desk.

She was back.

“Mother!” exclaimed Matt, breathless, when he rushed into the study. He had run all the way from the edge of the woods where he had been shooting birds, and he rushed around the desk and threw his arms around her as if he were a child. “Where have you been? What happened to you?” he choked out, overcome with unfamiliar emotion. “We were sure you were dead when we heard that horrible Devil Man had taken you.”

But Martha had things to do and plans to make, and she thought that whatever Matt had been through in worrying about her was nothing compared to what she had been through, so she cut the embrace short. She looked at him and said, “There is much I have to tell you.” Then she paused, and added, “And there is much I will not tell you. However, before any of that, there are plans to make.”

“Yes, Mother,” said Matt.

She turned to him suddenly and asked, “How was it, being in charge?”

“I—well . . . It wasn’t what I expected.”

“How is that?”

“It’s hard to explain, but I realized that I was kind of afraid. I was scared that what I did would be wrong. I had—well, there was—there was no one to blame,” he finished lamely. “I mean, if you’re in charge, I can do what I want and if you aren’t happy, I get in trouble with you and it’s—well, it’s sort of your problem. But when I was the boss, it was my problem. Father just did his usual things, and I had to try to do yours.”

He continued, uncharacteristically thoughtful. “And I guess I’m not you. You always know just what to do and I don’t. I guess I’m not ready . . . not just yet.”

Martha was surprised, and impressed. *Is my son actually maturing, growing into his legacy?* she wondered.

“Did your father help you?” she asked.

“He tried, but I guess I didn’t listen to him.”

Martha thought the line of conversation was over, but to her surprise, Matt had one more point to make. “The main thing was that I realized I couldn’t just do what I wanted anymore.”

Martha nodded. “Find Ahanu,” she said. “And bring him here. I need to speak to him about a

private matter.”

“Surely,” he said and got up to go. At the door, he turned back and smiled, completely relieved that his mother was back.

“And on your way to Ahanu,” Martha added, “send someone to find your father. I would speak with him.”